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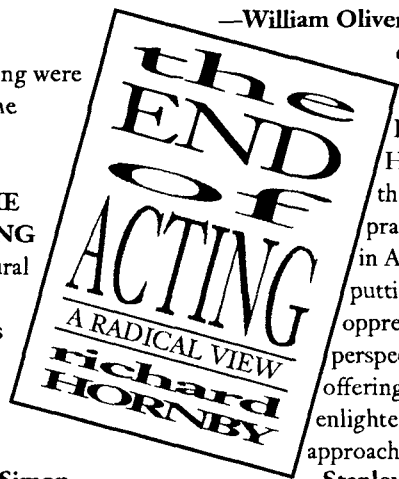

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

A new book by an Advisory Editor and one by a Contributing Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the books will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

DANA GIOIA: *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture.* Graywolf Press. $25.00; $12.00.

BERT CARDULLO: *Dramatic Considerations: Essays in Criticism, 1977–1987.* Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. $36.95.

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Comment:

The Ascendancy of Theor-ese

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT, delivered at a recent public symposium in New York City:

> My reading [of the media coverage of female murder suspects] registers power and reads the trace of desire for the Murderess. . . . Because the voices [of the female murder suspects] have been silenced, I talk of them as sites of rhetoric and representation—not as human beings, but as figures and tropes.

Anyone familiar with developments in the humanities over the last two decades can trace this statement's impeccable genealogy. Its invocation of "power" and the "trace of desire" conjures up Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida; its reduction of human beings to "tropes" rather fearlessly parrots Paul de Man; and its politically correct concern with the "silencing of voices" demonstrates its allegiance to contemporary "identity politics."

It is far more difficult, however, to identify the context of the utterance. It would be equally at home at a meeting of English, comparative literature, or film professors; at a historians' symposium; among critical legal scholars, radical sociologists, or "cultural studies" proponents; even, with minor modifications, among musicologists and architecture theorists. In fact, it was delivered at the Fifteenth Annual Whitney Symposium on American Art and Culture at the Whitney Museum of American Art last May. And in that uncertain conjunction lies the tale of the disintegration of the academy and the deterioration of our intellectual life.

The last two decades have seen the conquest of the humanities and the arts by "Theor-ese," the poststructuralist Esperanto of the "Theoretically Correct." The oft-lamented eradication of native cultures by a global American pop culture has not been as swift and decisive. Where once a scholar of Jacobean drama and of the Barbizon landscape school commanded separate subjects and critical tools, today they study and speak the identical poststructuralist goo of "discursive spaces," the "engendering of difference," the "contestation of phallologocentrism," and the "problematics of the gaze."

The ascendancy of Theor-ese in an area of study is always accompanied by the eclipse of its traditional subject matter. In the place of authors and specific works, courses and research are now organized around Theoretically Correct themes, the most Correct of all being,

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of course, "Difference." Where there *is* subject matter, it should be of a non-canonical nature. It is a sign of Theoretical election that one can perform as critically sophisticated a reading of situation comedies as of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

Concurrently with its internal colonization of academic disciplines, Theor-ese broke down the institutional boundaries between them. The growth of "interdisciplinary studies" in the university and the fascination in the non-academic creative world with "crossover" work are manifestations of the universalizing drive of Theor-ese. Its final triumph lies in the establishment of entire academic departments dedicated solely to itself—"Departments of Critical Theory," "Units for Criticism and Interpretive Theory," and misleadingly-titled "Humanities Centers."

This year's Whitney Symposium was the apotheosis of Theor-ese. The annual symposia began life as a forum in which the most promising doctoral candidates in art history could present their work. The Museum did not establish any content guidelines for the students' papers. This year, however, consistent with Whitney Director David Ross's predilection for Theoretically Correct thematic curating, the Symposium's organizers decided that it should have a single theme. To ensure utter topicality, the Whitney asked campuses across the country what the hot issues du jour were. The answer came back with a roar: Gender! And so originated this year's flawlessly correct topic: "Femininity and Masculinity: The Construction of Gender and the Transgression of Boundaries in 20th-Century American Art and Culture."

The most important innovation of the Symposium was not, however, its thematic organization. It was rather its abandonment of the archaic notion that art history has anything to do with art. Dispensing with that superstition allows one to reject as well the unfortunate corollary that to do art history one should be trained in the history of art. Demonstrating that the Whitney henceforth intends to conduct business strictly according to the mandate of Theor-ese, only two of the six panelists were art history students. The other students came from the more theoretically advanced fields of comparative literature, film studies, and that precocious harbinger of Universal Theor-ese—UC Santa Cruz's History of Consciousness Program.

It would have been inconsistent with the Theoretical Imperative had the jurors who selected the papers all been art historians. So of the four, one was a director of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, and another was the redoubtable Wahneema Lubiano, assistant professor of English and African-American Studies at Princeton. Lubiano became an instant hot ticket while at the University of Texas for her denunciation of universities as fundamentally "racist," and for her demand that the University immediately admit, hire, and tenure a "critical mass of 'minority' people *empowered at all levels* [to] contest unfair and inadequate representations" (i.e., to act as

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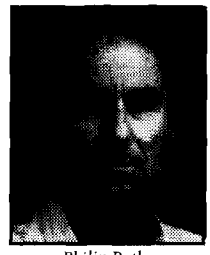

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ideological secret police). (Emphasis in original.) Her understanding of a university's mission undoubtedly led to her subsequent hiring by Princeton and made her a real catch for the Whitney.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Whitney Symposium was the opportunity to witness the final stages of a paradigm shift. Despite the strength of Theor-ese, the earlier paradigm of scholarly expertise still demands some recognition, even as it is being hurried off the stage. Thus, Education Curator Constance Wolf felt compelled at the start of the Symposium to justify the composition of the panels. The fact that only two of the panelists were art history students, she said, "is not to say that we are decreasing the presence of art history by expanding the program." Later in the day, reluctant juror Jonathan Weinberg, assistant professor of art history at Yale (Weinberg delivered a mea culpa for accepting a role he regards as fatally discredited by the Rodney King verdict), asked rhetorically if the paucity of speakers from art history departments "speaks to a weakness or crisis in the discipline." To the contrary, he concluded, the Symposium demonstrates that the Whitney "recognize[s] difference" and is "open to the culture of the university and the streets."

Once Theor-ese has finally vanquished all remnants of scholarship, such abject apologetics will be unnecessary. In the meantime, Wolf's claim that by decreasing the number of participating art history students, the Whitney had not decreased the presence of art history in the Symposium only *appears* contradictory. Under the Theoretical paradigm, since art historians no longer possess any special expertise or field of study, one could compose a panel solely of musicological gender theorists and still call it an "art history panel."

The panel's output proved Wolf right. Composing a panel entirely of art history students would not have increased the "presence of art history" at the Symposium. The existing art history students' papers were as devoid of anything resembling art history as were the other students' papers. All would be a great success, however, at the next meeting of the Modern Language Association Convention.

One paper was undoubtedly chosen for its title alone: "Kinky Escapades, Bedroom Techniques, Unbridled Passion, and Secret Sex Codes." Unfortunately, it promised more sizzle than it delivered. Its author, Matias Viegener, a comparative literature student at UCLA, introduced the audience to gay "fanzines" ("'zines," to the initiated). The introduction gave added dimension—depth—to the trendy "High-Low" conjunction. Gay "fanzines" are amateur magazines produced on a xerox machine, consisting largely of collages of movie and television stars in homoerotic poses. We spent a long time analyzing a drawing of a punk slut with her nipples showing, who was mysteriously trying to hitch a ride from a fellow pedestrian, a figure of indeterminate gender with its back turned to the viewer. This second figure was either exposing itself or getting ready to urinate. Viegener saw the inscrutability of the second figure's gender as a rich

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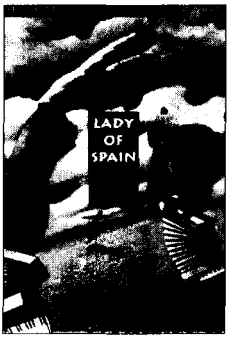

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source of artistic complexity. A simpler explanation was that the drawing was lousy. Its furiously scratchy pencilwork and uncertain proportions recalled an eleven-year-old boy's rendition of a battleship.

Viegener's aesthetic judgment, however, clearly qualifies him for a curatorship at the Whitney (whose retrospective of Mike Kelley, known for pornographically posing stuffed animals, looms imminently). And Viegener's hermeneutic skill marks him for success in the academic world. He saw the gay fanzine as a powerful weapon in the battle against the "legacy of the Enlightenment," which includes the "flimsy structures of the individual, autonomy, and equality." It will be quite a contest. On the one hand, Voltaire, Diderot, and Madison; on the other, "I Had Gay Sex with Bigfoot," and a poem charging the heavy metal rocker Axl Rose with repressed homosexuality and urging its addressee to "turn [his] thoughts to masturbation."

The quotation at the beginning of this essay was taken from History of Consciousness student Cathy Greenblatt's paper, "'For the woman who kills is a creature of awe': The Murderous and the Media." Greenblatt began by invoking Jack the Ripper's flawless knowledge of female gynecological anatomy, and went on to consider the media's treatment of two female murderers—the Texas "Pom-pom Mom," convicted of conspiring to kill the mother of her daughter's rival on the local cheerleading team, and a lesbian prostitute convicted of murdering her male customers in Florida.

Now literary theory has long been obsessed with the lurid. Jacques Derrida, the founder of deconstruction, described metaphysics in delicious detail as necromantic rape. Paul de Man, posthumously tarred by a youthful fling with Nazism, revelled in metaphors of violation, decapitation, and mutilation. The problem with these earlier forays into violence was that they remained rhetorical—the perpetrators and victims were only language and texts. The great advance of Greenblatt's paper was to move from the metaphorical to the real. Yet this being the domain of Theor-ese, the real must then immediately be rendered metaphorical. Hence Greenblatt's avowal that she will analyze the convicts "not as human beings, but as figures and tropes."

"Reconsidering the Stain: On the Inscription of the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Paintings" was likewise more interested in rhetoric than in substance. It had nothing to say about the formal qualities of Frankenthaler's "stain paintings," but analyzed instead the gynophobic implications of the term "stain." The paper argued that the misogynist term constituted the New York art critics' contribution to the plot to force women back into the home after World War II.

"Mothers and Anti-Mothers, or How to Ride the Backlash Without Wiping Out" considered the problem of whether it's un-PC to be pregnant. It concluded that it was. As an antidote to this patriarchal imposition upon the female body, it called for a campaign of

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"abortion art." Examples included an at-home abortion device in a vitrine, entitled, "Menstruation Extraction Kit," and an installation of photos of family planning clinics interspersed with full-sized photos of the installation artists overlain with nineteenth-century gynecological symbols.

"The Semiotic Solution: The Construction of Masculinity in Silent Comedy" analyzed silent comedies as an outlet for the emerging white-collar male's fantasies of power. The final paper, "Inventing the Look—Black Pastoral Women and the Invisible Man: Washington's Workers in the 20th Century," remedied a serious omission in the previous papers by bringing race into the Symposium. What it did beyond that, however, is difficult to say. Possibly it offered a revisionist reading of Booker T. Washington, but then again, maybe not.

If you find yourself asking, "But what has any of this to do with American art?," you obviously still "haven't got it." Under the new dispensation of Theor-ese, there is no such thing as "American art" distinct from other "cultural practices" such as political propagandizing. That the Whitney happens to hold an important collection of what was once called "American art" need not prove an embarrassment. Proper curating can reveal even such seemingly aesthetic works as Milton Avery's *Dunes and Sea II* and Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series as the embodiment of whatever happens to be today's Theoretical obsession.

HEATHER MAC DONALD

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The best time to write one's autobiography, surely, is on one's deathbed. Leaving aside the technical problem of getting the job done—all those interruptions from medicos, clergymen, florists, relatives—just before death, assuming one isn't squirming in pain, is likely to provide one's best shot at understanding one's own life, if not, granted, life itself. Writing one's autobiography at the very close of one's life would also give the story a nice rounded-off quality—a sense, as Dr. Kermode has it, of an ending. Before the end, after all, one is likely to have too much to defend and too much to hide, likely to be too worried about tact and about the tactics of one's own little career. But there, on one's deathbed, one can at last say—the hope is, with easeful breath—oh, screw it, let 'er rip, I shall tell the truth at last.

Until that time, though, truth about one's self and one's relationships with the people close to one is not usually freely expressed. Freud said that biographical truth was unavailable. Henry James thought that biography tended to flatten out life and make it thinner than in reality it is. And this, recall, is biography they were talking about. As for autobiography, Orwell, whose specialty was never that of putting things gently, said that "autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from inside is simply a series of defeats."

Yet, theoretically, writing autobiography ought not to be so horrendously difficult. The autobiographer, as Leslie Stephen long ago pointed out, has "*ex officio* two qualifications of supreme importance in all literary work. He is writing about a topic in which he is keenly interested, and about a topic upon which he is the highest authority." Autobiography, according to Stephen, also allows one to give way to "an irresistible longing

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for confidential expansion," which was that very superior late Victorian's elegantly euphemistic way of referring to the pleasure of spilling the beans. True, not everyone has the same quantity of beans to spill, and then, too, not all beans are equally delectable. Yet the urge at some point to spill them doubtless resides in most of us. All this being so, one would think there would be a great deal of first-class autobiography around.

There isn't. Nor has there ever been. The problem of lying by way of moral self-aggrandizement that Orwell alluded to plays a role here. The knowledge that one has been a miserable failure, and probably a creep into the bargain, is not easily made public and this is part of the problem. (All autobiographies, it has been noted, tend to grow dull at exactly the point where the autobiographer has achieved success.) Withholding evidence is a more serious part of the problem. But even this might be surmounted, or so one might think, if one didn't often withhold evidence even from oneself. Dostoyevsky, that perpetual drag on optimism, put the matter with damnable perfection when he wrote:

> Every man has reminiscences which he would not tell to everyone, but only to his friends. He has other matters in his mind which he would not reveal even to his friends, but only to himself, and that in secret. But there are other things which a man is afraid to tell even himself, and every man has a number of such things in his mind.

As if this weren't troublesome enough, one recognizes that the cards dealt one in life present further obstacles on the Damascene road to truth. The cards I have in mind are called parents (face cards, those), one's sex (low clubs), social class (diamonds), religion, nationality, toss in geography within one's nationality (hearts all). Add to this the distinct prospect of getting one's own story confused with other people's stories, a prospect perhaps greater than at any other time in the past, since there appears to be a vast quantity of such stories afloat just now. By other people's stories I mean the competing stories put forth by psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, you name it, many of which are there to be adopted by the pliant-minded as their very own. Every psychoanalysand is, after all, merely a

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prone autobiographer, with the main themes of his story having already been foretold by that dogmatic, cigar-smoking gentleman from Vienna. Fresh stories of this generic kind are put into play with fair regularity. A psychiatrist of my acquaintance tells me that nowadays, owing to the publicity that child-abuse stories have received on television and in the press, a large number of patients under psychiatric care are combing their pasts searching for child abuse in their own lives. Surprise, surprise, with only a little stretch of the imagination, a little twist of personal history, not a few find it.

The cards one is dealt in life have a way of occluding, channelling, shaping the facts of one's life to the point where it is not always certain they can any longer be called facts. The potential motives for writing autobiography—ranging from the need for vengeance, to setting down for the record what a winsome fellow one is, to being a writer with nothing else in mind to write at the present time—are as great as those for going on with life itself. Alas, despite one's belief in objective truth, one has to allow the distinct possibility that there may be no autobiographical truth but only a handful of splendid autobiographies.

Odd, but very few of these really splendid autobiographies have been written by novelists, poets, and playwrights. Saint Augustine, Cellini, Rousseau, Gibbon, Franklin, Mill, Alexander Herzen, Henry Adams, the men—and there have thus far been almost no women—who wrote the monumental autobiographical works were none of them primarily imaginative literary artists. Henry James, that consummate artist, botched his two volumes of autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of A Son and Brother*—botched them insofar as they have no real standing as discrete works of art, but are of interest chiefly as Jamesian curiosities. How strange that Henry James, surely the greatest master of introspection the world has known, should fail at autobiography, which, at its best, is primarily the art of introspection.

Perhaps there is something about autobiography that discomfits literary artists. Literary artists, it has been said, use up their autobiographical experience, in more or less transmuted form, in their poems and plays, stories and novels. But the truth is that, in the use of experience, artists have been great

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recyclers long before the term recycling was invented. Why not run the same material through once more, this time non-fictionally or non-poetically, in one's autobiography? Many a literary artist has tried, but not generally with impressive results. Vladimir Nabokov's lovely autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, seems to me a notable exception, though it is a work driven by a deep nostalgic yearning for a lost country. But so overwhelmingly is this the case that one is inclined to think that perhaps autobiography and pure art are if not antithetical then less than compatible, and the better the artist the poorer the autobiographer he is likely to prove. To cite only two fairly recent examples, Anthony Powell, whose novels can be so greatly pleasing, wrote four volumes of autobiography that, for dullness, could bring sleep to an insomnia ward. Evelyn Waugh, who hadn't an uninteresting sentence in him, wrote, in *A Little Learning*, a single, most disappointing volume of autobiography.

My own two-cent theory holds that artists don't finally believe in autobiography; deep down they don't hold with it, as an earlier generation used to say, as a sufficiently worthy vessel of truth-telling. They don't hold with it principally because they sense, if they do not absolutely know, that there is a higher truth than that offered by the pedestrian but necessary factuality demanded by autobiography. Or, as Goethe wrote in *Fiction and Truth*: "A fact of our existence is of value not insofar as it is true, but insofar as it has something to signify." Only in art do all facts signify.

Not all but a fair part of the pleasure of reading autobiography is in catching the autobiographer out in suspicious reticences, self-serving misperceptions, cover-ups, and, of course, delightfully clever deceptions. What's he hiding, what's he withholding, why doesn't he talk about his first wife, who's he kidding leaving out his children, odd he never mentions money—such are the questions that roam randomly through the mind of your normally licentious reader of autobiography. An intelligent person reads autobiography for two things: for the facts and for the lies, knowing that the lies are often more interesting than the facts. From the other side, that of the writer, if you make yourself look good in your autobiography, you seem a hypocrite; own up to being a swine, you will have no

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difficulty finding people who will readily enough believe you. Not a game at which it is easy to win, autobiography.

This is not to say that the appetite for reading autobiography isn't very strong. Certainly it is with me, so much so that autobiography is the only kind of book I should rather read than write. (I have myself long ago decided never to write an autobiography, preferring to spend my own autobiography, in nickels and dimes, in essays, memoirs, and anecdotes.) The appetite for autobiography reaches quite across the brows, from high to appallingly low. Hence the vast sums laid out by publishers for the life stories—"self-biographies," Isaac D'Israeli called them—of such men and women far on the other side of the literary divide as Norman Schwartzkopf and Magic Johnson, Katharine Hepburn and the Mayflower Madame. Which reminds me that a friend of mine, who works on celebrity autobiographies, was simultaneously writing the autobiographies of Tip O'Neill, former Speaker of the House, and the Mayflower Madame, speaker of a house of another kind. I worried for him throughout these projects, fearful that he might mix up his galleys.

I have just read six autobiographies—one of these of two volumes, together running to more than 850 pages. Three of these are by Englishmen, three by very different sorts of Americans. One of the latter is a woman and two among them are Southerners and set in the South, which, one sometimes feels, is another country unto itself. I have the feeling that none of my six autobiographers would at all wish to spend much time in the company of any of the others. As a reader, I can say that all have stepped into my little confessional, and, having now heard them out, I don't know what penance ought to be assigned to them. A wise guy might say that it was I who served the penance, having to read all these pages filled with disdain, chagrin, outrage, and petty vengeance. Still, reading autobiography, while it does not increase one's hope for the race, does lend vast amusement in watching it all pass in review from the rail.

What also emerges—though perhaps my selection of autobiographies has an oddly skewed bias in this direction—is that one is never too old to express resentment against one's parents. Not many kind words for parents here; very few

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parents in these books come off at all handsomely; grandparents, too, take a few good shots. It's almost as if their authors all subscribed to Philip Larkin's view in "This Be The Verse," a version of which perhaps needs to be rewritten for parents:

> You tick them off, your son and daughter.
> You may not mean to, but you do.
> In old age and even death, expect from them no quarter,
> Nothing but resentment, and all aimed just at you.

National differences might be the best place to begin. Auberon Waugh offers an interesting throw-away sentence in his autobiography, *Will This Do?*, which seems to me nicely to distinguish the differences between English and American autobiography in our day. The sentence runs: "Of all the qualities of the British, this readiness to mock and subvert is the one that makes life in Britain preferable to life anywhere else." Whether the readiness to mock and subvert makes life better is arguable, but I think it is undoubtedly true that a tone of subversive mockery has been the reigning one in English intellectual life for a goodly while now, dominant in English plays, novels, and journalism. I think that this tone would, after a bit, become something of a strain on those who live by it; I have been around Englishmen whose tone it is and I can vouch that those who go in for it in a big way grow tiresome fairly quickly. When this tone came into being—one that implies in its very inflection, "No crap gets past me, Jack"—can be dated with unusual precision. It dates, precisely, from 1954, which is the publication date of Kingsley Amis' second novel, *Lucky Jim*. What Holden Caulfied did for a vast number of American adolescents—give them a strong distaste for phoniness—Jim Dixon did, much more wittily, for generations of English intellectuals, with the results still to be seen nearly forty years later.

And now Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*'s inventor, once an angry young man now at the age of seventy turned corpulent curmudgeon, has come forth with an autobiography of his own.[1] Contemplation of such a book must have caused the old

[1] MEMOIRS, by *Kingsley Amis*. Summit Books. $25.00.

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con-detector in Amis to twist a bit in his sheets. But he has met the problem head on by pretty much straightaway avoiding it. In his Preface Amis notes that he has decided in his *Memoirs* to "keep myself from center stage" and to "focus on others rather than myself." His chief reason for doing so, he continues, is that "to publish an account of my own intimate, domestic, sexual experiences would hurt a number of people who have emotional claims on me . . . and I have no desire to cause pain, or further pain, to them or myself." This makes Mr. Amis seem rather a more sensitive chap than he turns out to be, for there is bloodletting aplenty in the pages of his memoirs; it is mainly his apron that comes out clean at his book's close.

In defense of his not writing about himself, Amis claims that the professional life of the writer is intrinsically dull. "Who would want to read about the time I had thinking up and writing one book or another and what I felt about its reviews, sales, translation into Catalan, or about how I spent my summer holidays in 1959?" (This is exactly the subject of the second volume of Anthony Burgess' autobiography, as we shall discover presently, who does all this quite interestingly.) Something I should not have minded reading about is Kingsley Amis' view of the strange curve of his career. For that career is one of those odd ones dominated by a single book, his second, the aforementioned one about fortunate James. Amis has never come close to writing another novel near so good. I continue to read Kingsley Amis' novels, always finding highly amusing bits in them, but all seem longueur-laden, at once too densely written and too relentlessly clever, so that the play of language and the spirit of put-down inevitably dominate plot or character. Even though Amis has had his share of the world's rewards—all of the usual literary prizes and, recently, a knighthood—to have labored nearly forty full years without quite hitting the gong a second time after clanging it resoundingly once cannot have been pleasing to contemplate, in life or in an autobiography.

As with his novels, so with this autobiography, Kingsley Amis is not much concerned with dark or very deep truths; he is only occasionally prepared to engage in candor, and generally ready to settle for honesty of a slashing kind, usually at the expense of others. Amis' very style, literary and psychological, his strong

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anti-nonsense approach to life, has made it all but impossible for him to write anything approaching a conventional autobiography. So instead he has told a number of anecdotes, blasted a few old enemies, made a few new ones, pulled down the flag early, and made off for the pub.

None of which is not to say that there aren't charming things in the book. Amis has kind words for his friend Philip Larkin and tells funny stories about Robert Conquest. He writes that "one reason for the inferiority of women novelists to men, if indeed they are inferior, may well be that comparatively few of them shave with any regularity," for it is during shaving that novelists often get their best ideas, which is a shot with, as they say in the pool hall, lots of English on it. He is crushing on Dylan Thomas, Freudianism, Cyril Connolly, Philip Toynbee, & Co.; there is a standard bashing of George Steiner for his pretense to cultural omniscience and for his restrained hand as a host with booze. (A restrained hand at the liquor cabinet never earns Amis' gratitude.) A bit of candor we could have done well without crops up in a brief scene in which Amis and Malcolm Muggeridge drunkenly gang-bang a famous literary widow. He writes warmly about a journalist named George Gale, whom he describes as "a foe of bullshit." For Amis how one lines up in relation to bullshit turns out to be how he lines up his own friends or foes. As for what constitutes bullshit, for Amis the pretentious, the overblown, the obviously stupid, and immitigably unreal chiefly qualify.

All this puts Kingsley Amis very much in the English common sense tradition. So, of course, was his friend Philip Larkin. This quality is seen in highest relief in Amis' reaction to Larkin's poem "Aubade," the powerful poem about the man waking "at four to soundless dark," contemplating with terror the oblivion that awaits him in death. Of this poem, Amis says he regrets not having found a way of telling Larkin "that depression among the middle-aged and elderly is common in the early morning and activity disperses it, as you tell us in your last stanza, so if you feel as bad as you say then fucking get up, or if it's too early or something then put the light on and read Dick Francis."

Yet there is a softer side to Amis that does not disqualify the commonsensical streak in him but recognizes that common

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sense, though it is all we have, can only take one so far. Bloody human condition, you might say. Amis has seen his share of shrinks, he relates, for his own psychic system has had its share of jigeroos: he has suffered agoraphobia, marital problems, bouts of melancholia. He has valued his friends and seems to have enjoyed his enemies, but is now old enough to know that life is in good part about loss. The best of Kingsley Amis, which is not the characteristically public Kingsley Amis, comes through in the final words of his portrait in this book of Philip Larkin:

> My sorrow at his death and my abiding sense of loss is tinged with regret. He was my best friend and I never saw enough of him or knew him as well as I wanted to. If I had, I might have been able to tell him, among other things, that he was a wonderful poet whose work would last. But as it is I have to fall back on hoping he knew I thought so.

Amis likes America, and Americans generally, but thinks Americans do not really like literature for itself but for the generalizations that can be drawn from it. This causes we gringos, he believes, to go in for the balmy and the self-inflated, which in his opinion includes such cases of "literary elephantiasis" as Saul Bellow, James Dickey, Norman Mailer, and Allen Ginsberg. Like most English writers of his generation, he has a low view of the academic study of literature, and, given the turn that it has taken, one must add rightly so. Amis holds that Americans are "not much good at art, high art, fine art," but powerfully good at hybrids like jazz, movies, science fiction (at which he has himself dabbled). Where such English writers as Anthony Powell and Iris Murdoch continue producing into old age, American writers, in his view, with their "fondness for size, for big books, for large statements, subjects, themes, a desire for greatness *now* rather than after a few decades of work," tend to go under, "destined to be or become stricken deer, misfits, assorted victims and freaks, drunks rather than mere drinkers, hermits, suicides." Something to it, I fear. Yet one wonders if the tradition of common sense, of the small bite, of which Kingsley Amis is at once proponent and exemplar, will itself any longer quite do. At just this moment in English literary life, for example, the novelists who seem to be stirring

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the most interest in England—V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Kazui Ishiguro—tend to be non-Englishmen of English education.

No one would accuse Anthony Burgess of either common sense or taking the small bite. But then nor does Burgess, who has lived in tax-fleeing exile from England for many years now, seem, when one gets down to it, especially English. His lineage is Irish and Catholic, for one thing. His ambitions, for another, are extra- or para-English. His productivity, of which he has himself by now doubtless heard too much, doesn't feel particularly English either. "I have written much fiction and reviewed widely and unbrophianly [a reference to the book reviews intended to maim written by Brigid Brophy], and I was sneered at for over-production and reviled for compassionate blandness." Mr. Burgess is not a man to forget a bad review, many of which he quotes, rather like showing old scars, in his autobiography, and this, too, does not seem particularly English.[2]

I have not myself had very good luck with Mr. Burgess' novels, only one of which, *Earthly Powers*, I have been able to read all the way through. As he puts it early in *You've Had Your Time*, the second volume of his autobiography: "I was, am, trying to be a kind of comic novelist playing with a few ideas." Fair enough, except that the ideas he has chosen to play with have not, somehow, seemed much to interest me. I do read his literary journalism, and am often impressed by his erudition, his extraordinary range, his facility—when invited to review a book, it is said of him, he generally answers the invitation by providing the finished review. Mr. Burgess' talent is not in doubt; nor is his seriousness. He is a writer I rather admire without necessarily longing to read.

One comes away from his two-volume autobiography in something of the same condition: rather admiring his accomplishment of having got so much work done, of having maintained his independence without toadying to anyone, of having survived at least eleven different kinds of hell—and yet without particularly liking him. Burgess speaks at one point of Orwell's

[2] LITTLE WILSON AND BIG GOD, by *Anthony Burgess*. Grove Weidenfeld. $14.95p. YOU'VE HAD YOUR TIME, by *Anthony Burgess*. Grove Weidenfeld. $23.50.

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"power to ensour things," but he himself can usually be relied upon to take the smile out of Christmas. He passes Orwell's own test for autobiography by recounting many disgraceful things about himself and by tending to view his own life as, for the most part, a series of defeats.

The first of Burgess' two autobiographical volumes deals with his birth and education and horrific first marriage, and ends with him being told that he has an inoperable brain tumor that will allow him at best a year to live. His second volume deals with his wife's death and his remarriage, but it has chiefly to do with the literary life. This second volume is impressive for, among other things, its sheer comprehensiveness. Anthony Burgess has been a literary man of all work, having not only written in all the standard literary forms—poems, novels, plays, criticism, journalism—but translation for the stage and for opera, libretti, movies, television scripts, everything short of subpoenas and health-food labels. "I had become," he notes at one point of his various literary jobs, "the least fatigable of hacks." He has come through all this neither a rich man nor a cheerful one, but he has come through with all that a writer can hope for, his skill and his integrity intact. No small victory.

Certain of us go through life acquiring large grievances, and live out our days attempting to collect claims on them that can never be repaid. Mr. Burgess began life with a most serious grievance and claim of this kind. His mother and older sister died, in the great influenza epidemic of 1919, when he was only two years old. Given his rather indifferent father, who remarried to an unfeeling woman, this left poor John Anthony Burgess Wilson (for such is his full name, later shortened by a publisher) immediately alone, emotionally chilled, bereft, a twentieth-century Dickensian character in a novel that would have no happy ending. "This boy," Burgess writes of himself, "nine, going on ten, was clearly abnormal. He needed a real mother, not a surrogate one, and a real-life male model, not a mostly absent drunk who called himself a father."

Setting aside the human consequences of this sadness, for a man whose entire life is literature, the literary consequences, too, have to be calculated. No one is better fit to do this than Mr. Burgess, who, in a striking passage of self-knowledge, writes of his upbringing:

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> I was not in rags and I did not starve. I was permitted an education. But I regret the emotional coldness that was established then and which, apart from other faults, has marred my work. I read of family relationships in other people's books and I envy equally the tranquility and the turbulence. *Sons and Lovers* and *Fathers and Sons* are from an alien planet which I can visit only by stretching my imagination.

This unfortunate absence of family feeling in a novelist is not a minor defect; if one believes that love and the family are two of the great—perhaps the greatest—subjects of the novel, it might just be a major defect. At a minimum, it would tend to force such a novelist to fall back upon satire, upon the schematic, upon the ideational, upon the play of language in and for itself, all of which seems to have been the result in Mr. Burgess' case.

Burgess' two volumes press the question of how deep in detail one should go in the writing of autobiography. At times Burgess himself threatens to rival Borges' poor child Ireneo Funes, in his story "Funes the Memorius," who could not forget anything and died young of what we should today call information overload. Burgess telling us that he missed his comic books in the General Strike of 1926 seems a detail if not worth forgetting then probably worth failing to record. One can't fault Burgess for want of candor. He not only fills us in on all his and his wife's love affairs, but tells us of their giving each other crabs (initially acquired elsewhere) and remarks on his own youthful propensity for premature climax ("it sounds," he remarks, "like a damn critic's rebuke"), a problem he conquered by quoting to himself from Milton, *Paradise Lost*, "Book Two." (The study of literature, it seems, has its uses after all.) Sex, as described by Burgess in these volumes, is never overly elegant.

After himself, the central figure in Burgess' autobiography is his first wife, Lynne, whose infidelities to him, and his to her, on two continents he recounts in a rather matter of fact way. Their marriage, in Burgess' present view of it, was a mistake from the start. It was not much aided by her being mugged by American GIs in London, causing her to abort her pregnancy and cutting off forever the chance of her having children. Instead the Burgesses substituted cats, at one point in Brunei, where he

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had a teaching job, having no fewer than twenty-five of them. She added gin to this recipe for family disaster, and more than once attempted suicide. Toss in jealousy, resentment, and rivalrousness and you have quite a domestic dish. "Lynne and I cautiously settled to a country life enlivened mostly with drunkenness and threats of suicide," Burgess writes, in a sentence of chillingly calm rhythm. Yet when Burgess' wife dies, not yet fifty, of alcoholism, he feels, yes, of course, luscious guilt, which he seems to have attempted to work off in this autobiography by demonstrating what a monstrous character she was. If raising a writer is not such a good idea, marrying one is not a less perilous proposition.

Burgess makes the most modest claims for himself as an artist in this autobiography. (Kingsley Amis, in his, makes no claims whatever.) "I do not boast about the quality of my work," he writes, "but I may be permitted to pride myself on the gift of steady application. . . . The gift of concentration stays with me, and it is perhaps my only gift." In fact, Anthony Burgess is an immensely gifted man. But one of the things that comes strongly through his autobiography is that he would have traded all his literary accomplishments for a career in serious musical composition. At one point, he refers to "the novel, the only literary genre for failed symphonists." In his first volume, he tells us that "at the age of thirteen I decided that I was to be a great composer, and I trained myself, pursuing an indulged hobby, to that end. It was an ambition that only really faded in my late thirties, and sometimes, in my late sixties, it is encouraged to re-emerge." In the 1980s, he composed a symphony that was played at the University of Iowa, and so a childhood dream was realized. It may well be that only music, in its abstraction and in its propensity to submerge to depths beneath the verbal, could have given true expression to Burgess' wounds.

The world has never been a pleasant place for Anthony Burgess, and he is not very intent on changing it—he is for the most part apolitical—or himself. He was, he reports, offered Lionel Trilling's job at Columbia, but turned it down. "Security for life, high status, the dignity of scholarship. I think, however, I made the right decision in refusing the honor. It was not really suited to one masochistically inclined to the hard knocks

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of the Grub Street life, not inclined to disdain vulgarity in the right place, one not averse to scandal." Liana, his second wife, he notes, "importuned me to make myself more simpatico, but I would not. Had Dante made himself simpatico?" Old mothers' wisdom impels one to reply, "Very well, but first be Dante."

Everything Anthony Burgess writes in this autobiography is believable. He cannot be accused of blowing his own tuba. There is a lifelike, inexorable dreariness to his account of his own days, relieved by flashes of wit. (To the rumor that he was living in a *ménage à trois*, with his wife and a beautiful Ethiopian secretary in Manhattan, Burgess responds that the rumor was "only two-thirds true.") Yet is his finally the true perspective? Or is it instead that writers, who not only by the nature of their occupation but because of the depression that all too often seems to have sent them into this occupation to begin with, are the least qualified for telling us what their lives have been about? Under the enchantment of their words, one is almost ready to believe them, no matter how chilling their account. Then one remembers that the world abounds in beautiful children, music, lush landscapes, friends, delightful food, and more than enough artworks to divert the mind through a lifetime, and the words, like frost on a wintry windowpane, melt away.

I am in danger here of imitating Auberon Waugh, who, at the close of his autobiography, *Will This Do?*, remarks that "the only real wisdom I have acquired in fifty years of living is the banal, frequently made point that happiness requires no more than good food, good wine, laughter, and the presence of friends."[3] Then, with a Wavian touch, he adds: "Even friends may not be altogether necessary." The comedy of viewing things, if not quite *sub specie aeternitatis*, then at a cool distance is the Waugh gift, passed down from father to son. Auberon Waugh, in a characteristic sentence, writes of an uncle: "Although keenly appreciative of the good things of life, Alick was primarily a philosopher, and this may have given him the strength necessary to face a life without work." That, too, is a

[3] WILL THIS DO?, by *Auberon Waugh*. Century Publishing Co. £15.99.

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sentence with a lot of English on it. Many such in Mr. Waugh's autobiography.

I see that I have written a full paragraph about Auberon Waugh without mentioning, by name, his father Evelyn, a writer whose work has perhaps given as much pleasure to its readers as any other in this century. Of all the world's blessings, surely the most mixed is that of having a famous parent or—worse luck still—parents. To be the son or daughter of a famous artist may well be the most thoroughly mixed blessing of all. Nathan Asch, the novelist son of the (in his day) internationally best-selling novelist Sholem Asch, at the beginning of an essay about himself and his father, once put the case devastatingly: "Though it has not been written about much, the children of famous artists do not have an easy time, nor do they usually end up well. There is more apostasy, suicide, homosexuality, fraud, and lying, as well as plain ne'er-do-wellism among them than among children of other kinds of people." To have an artist for a father is one thing; but if that artist is Evelyn Waugh, whose nearly every utterance was barbed with icy irony, madcap comedy, and occasional motiveless cruelty, then you are really playing the games spades double.

Auberon Waugh, his autobiography leads one to believe, has beaten that game, at least to the extent that it is beatable. In *Will This Do?* Mr. Waugh cites letters from his father about himself and his brothers and sisters that even now cannot make pleasant reading for him. "My children were much in evidence and boring," Evelyn Waugh wrote in one such letter. He makes jokes about favoring books over his son: "the truth is that a child is easily replaced, while a book destroyed is utterly lost." On another occasion, in his diary, he noted: "My children weary me. I can only see them as defective adults: feckless, destructive, frivolous, sensual, humourless. . . ."

The lesson that Waugh's children had to learn—and it must have been a ghastly difficult one—was not to take much of this personally. Auberon Waugh reports: "'Why do you expect me to talk to this boring pig?' he [Evelyn Waugh] would suddenly shout at his hostess about some guest. 'He is common, he is ignorant and he is stupid, and he thinks Picasso is an important artist.'" Not much relief to be had, either, from Laura Waugh, of whom her son Auberon writes that she loved the cows she

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kept "as other women love their dogs or, as I have been told, their children." Of a later period in his life, when at seventeen he was allowed to go off to live for a spell by himself in Italy, with very little guidance from home, he writes of his parents: "But I would like to think that there was a streak of committed libertarianism in their make-up which harmonized with their natural inclination toward indifference." With such parents one either develops character or goes under. None of the Waugh children went under. Put that in your Dr. Spock and smoke it.

What Auberon Waugh seems to have done is, in the fullness of time, take his father's measure. He came to understand that there was a large streak of melancholia in Evelyn Waugh's nature, perhaps even what we nowadays term "clinical depression"; he came to learn how easily he was bored, and how almost palpably painful boredom was to him; he came to realize his father's limitations when, directly after the war, with fresh fruit still in short supply, he saw his father wolf down all three bananas allotted to his family, and "from that moment, I never treated anything he had to say on faith or morals very seriously"; he came, as he grew older, to appreciate his father's light-handed and often good-hearted whimsy; and, not long after he, Auberon, was badly wounded in a machine-gun accident while serving in the British Army in Cyprus, he came "to be quite fond of my father, never having liked him much in childhood or early youth"; and in the end, he came to love him, writing of him after his death:

> But he still projected an immensely powerful presence. Just as school holidays had been happier and more carefree when he was away, so his death lifted a great brooding awareness not only from the house but from the whole of existence. Papa possessed to an unusual degree the power of making other people want to please him. . . . Nothing ever happened to me while he was alive but I mentally subedited it into a report which would be sent to him in my next letter. . . . It was many years before I could break the habit of viewing every event with half an eye to the bulletin I would send to my father. Even now, I find when I hear a funny story about someone in whom he would have been interested—the child of a friend, perhaps, or some grandee—I mentally store it away to repeat to him. There always follows a pang of bereavement when I remember that he is no longer around to hear it.

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Having so famous a father has to be the overriding fact in one's life, and so it has been in Auberon Waugh's. Mr. Waugh is candid and evenhanded in toting up the debits and credits of this fact as it bore on his career: the doors that opened to him because he was his father's son, the enemies that came to him ready made for the same reason, the expectations the name Waugh aroused, and the rest of it. Although Mr. Waugh has been on his own since the age of twenty, earning his own way as a journalist in a very competitive English field, although he raised a large family, wrote five youthful novels, is the principal editor of a journal (*Literary Review*), although he is himself now an entirely established figure in English intellectual life and even by now a grandfather, he remains, for better *and* worse, the son of Evelyn Waugh. The plain truth is that, in this generally agreeable autobiography, far and away the most interesting passages of the book have to do with Evelyn Waugh, a dominating presence even in death. Auberon Waugh is very good at what he does—and what he does, as he himself allows, is practice the vituperative arts through journalism; he claims, rightly, to have a small gift "for making the comment, at any given time, which people like least to hear." Yet there is a sense in which without his father he could not be said to exist. Unfair though it is, one cannot, even now, read him without comparing him to his father; even when he is very good, one tends to think his father might have done it better. Not a light burden, this. In English public schools, when two brothers are at the school together, they are distinguished, older from younger, by the designation of major and minor. Luck of the draw, poor Aubernon Waugh, not a brother but a son, is condemned always to be Waugh minor.

Ben Sonnenberg has drawn not one but two difficult cards. He, too, has had a less but still a famous enough father—also named Ben Sonnenberg, an art collector and a self-advertised genius at public relations, work he once likened to "making giant plinths for little men to stand on." Sonnenberg's second tough card has been his health; he was hit with the poisoned dart of multiple sclerosis, the degenerative disease that he first learned he had at the age of thirty-four and that by his late forties left him so weakened that he could no longer turn the

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pages of the magazine, *Grand Street*, which he had founded and loved to edit. Rotten luck.

With Ben Sonnenberg's *Memoirs & Confessions of A Bad Boy*[4] we move from English to American autobiography, though, to be sure, Mr. Sonnenberg is not the kid next door who had the paper route and won the state tournament by sinking two free throws in overtime. (Long before he might have been doing such things, he was upstairs in his parents' antique-stuffed mansion on Gramercy Park trying to *schtupp* one of the maids.) Americans write autobiography very differently than do the English. They tend to bring a heavier freight to the task: of grudges against parents, of distaste for their country, of anger at life for not working out. Americans do not, when writing autobiography, allow themselves much distance. The air in which they work is dense, the emotions intense. Although bits of humor are allowed, the general atmosphere is grim. Thus turn to almost any page in Ben Sonnenberg's autobiography and you hear the gnip-gnop of that endless ping-pong match of *Sturm* versus *Drang*.

Why, one wonders, does it scarcely ever occur to an American to write an amusing autobiography? Auberon Waugh's is an amusing book; so, too, allowing for a certain acid content, is Kingsley Amis'. Ben Sonnenberg's might have been; the freedom that his family money made available to him gave him a privileged seat at the human masquerade carried on in some of its most sumptuous and absurd costumes. Mr. Sonnenberg has, moreover, taste and literary style; he has read widely and is, in almost every wise, no dope. Rather than writing an amusing autobiography, he has written one that prefers instead to show what a wild screw-up he has been. But the reasons for his screwing up are perhaps less fascinating than he thinks them. It is also, in his rendering of it, a story with something like a partially happy ending: notorious screw-up finds redemption through editing a highbrow little magazine that is "an insolent reflection of only one man's taste," which is "admired by those I admired."

Ben Sonnenberg's story is by now not so uncommon a one as

[4] LOST PROPERTY: Memoirs & Confessions of a Bad Boy, by *Ben Sonnenberg*. Summit Books. $18.95.

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he might think. It is the story of a family going, in three generations, from a Russian Jewish immigrant selling clothes out of a pushcart on the Lower East Side in New York to a grandson editing a modish, left-wing little magazine called *Grand Street*, considerably more modish and uptown in every way. But Mr. Sonnenberg's is finally a story that might appear under the rubric of My Hate Belongs to Daddy. Although Mr. Sonnenberg is busily banging nails into his father's coffin in this book, his father manages to emerge—not, to be sure, from the coffin but from the book—as rather attractive nonetheless. A man whose snobbery took an Anglophiliac turn, Ben Sonnenberg, Sr., went everywhere and knew everyone: "I know the difference between Irving Berlin and Isaiah Berlin," he once told an interviewer, "and I know them both." It was not uncommon for Orson Welles to pop into a restaurant and ask Sonnenberg, Sr., what the hell he was doing there. He was, as his son notes, especially artful at the secondary name-drop. When he was asked if he knew George Gershwin, Sonnenberg *père* replied, "*Know* him? I used to play gin rummy with his mother."

One of the most troublesome things about having a powerful father is that he is likely to leave an endlessly lingering doubt that one is not the man one's father was. (A powerful mother is no easier, leaving the even more troubling doubt that one is not the man one's mother was.) Mr. Sonnenberg seems to have grown up almost entirely in reaction to his father. When his father bought the house at 20 Gramercy Park next to his mansion at 19 Gramercy Park and evicted the tenants, one of whom was Norman Thomas, young Ben instantly became a socialist. He used all the standard modern rich boy's vengeance gambits: getting kicked out of lots of schools, racking up debts, clocking heavy therapy time—the desperation of a young man who, however truly desperate he may be, in his heart knows he is working with a golden net under him. Sonnenberg, Jr., grew enormously fat—turned into a bulimic without the vomiting part. As he grew older, his tastes in dissipation changed but not the main project, which seemed to be wasting his life. "Reading books, buying art, writing unproduced plays, seducing women," he notes, "not much of a life."

It would have remained such had not Sonnenberg, at age forty-three, his multiple sclerosis confining him increasingly to

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a wheelchair, begun his magazine, *Grand Street*, modelled on Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*. *Grand Street* was, under Mr. Sonnenberg's editorship, literary and leftist, and better when it was the former rather than the latter. As a subscriber to the magazine for most of its ten-year life, I thought it often filled with good things, and I miss it now that it has been passed on to another editor, Jean Stein, who has very different, rather depressing notions about what constitutes an interesting magazine. *Grand Street* was an achievement, a thing built out of nothing, and Mr. Sonnenberg, after a life of more than four decades of "fastidious disengagement," of specializing in nonachievement, is justly proud of it. "At last," he writes, "I was doing something my father would have liked: which would have spoiled it for me, instantly." Fathers and sons, sons and fathers, Turgenev, baby, you didn't know the half of it.

Let us not speak of fathers and daughters, except that a remarkable autobiography entitled *The Bookmaker's Daughter* by Shirley Abbott takes up this relationship in a most interesting way that compels me to do so.[5] Miss Abbott is a writer of my generation—she is in her middle fifties—until now unknown to me. She has written one earlier book, *Womenfolks: Growing Up Down South*, which I have not read but whose title suggests that it might be what I have come to think of as a genderbender—that is, one of those books that twists and crushes all experience to tell yet another story of relentless oppression. I hope I am quite wrong about this, though what leads me to think I may not be is the occasional shot of feminudging that shows up in *The Bookmaker's Daughter*: Miss Abbott notes that there were few books by female authors in her father's library or that women didn't seem to make out so well in the fairy tales read to her as a child. In the current intellectual climate, it takes, I suppose, real character to resist such silliness, and Miss Abbott isn't always able to do so.

Shirley Abbott is much better than this. She is a writer of wit and penetration; she has a style and can do splendid things with it. She has sensed, too, that the conditions of her upbringing, as

[5] THE BOOKMAKER'S DAUGHTER: A Memory Unbound, by *Shirley Abbott*. Ticknor & Fields. $19.95.

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the daughter of a cash-out man in an elaborate bookie operation in Hot Springs, Arkansas, a town that shared both a traditional Southern ethos and corruption of a kind that was only to be met in the city of Chicago during its palmier days, and in a few other sin cities of the South, make for rich material of an autobiographical kind. Miss Abbott grew up a daddy's girl in a marriage that was generally civil but, in her view, finally and sadly loveless. She was an only child. Her mother was never other than good to her, but her father, she early sensed, had a true stake in her.

One can grow up with a steady belief in goodness and then go on to be progressively shocked by the corruption inherent in life; or one can grow up believing in the corruption inherent in life and then go on to be fairly regularly surprised by how much goodness there is in the world. As someone who grew up in the second way, I tend to agree with Miss Abbott's father, who, when she was a child, gave her, as the Jews say, the *emess*, or the real lowdown: "Life is not led according to the civics books. Life is not Sunday school. Life is two-thirds con." Her father, known to his confreres as Hat Abbott, also told his daughter, "That's how people are, darling—never satisfied. Always wanting more."

Living in Hot Springs, the child Shirley—named, she tells us, after Shirley Temple—would have had to have been morally dyslexic to have read life any other way. Hot Springs was in those days what was known as a wide open town. It had the Southern Club, where one could place bets, a race track, hookers at the ready, an historical tradition that included such luminaries among its visitors as the Younger Brothers, the James Brothers (not, distinctly, William and Henry), and the Capone Brothers. At the center of the town was a health spa, the baths, where people with various complaints, from arthritis to impotence, sought surcease from physical anguish in the putatively magical properties of hot spring water. Available, too, was surcease from boredom in the form of gambling of all sorts and women of one sort. When I was a boy in Chicago, old sports used to take their girlfriends and cuff links down to Hot Springs for the racing season in February, stay at the Arlington Hotel, take the baths and live it up. Las Vegas and regular air travel put a serious crimp in the action at Hot Springs, which, after the early 1950s, never quite revived.

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With deft strokes, Miss Abbott limns her parents' lives in Hot Springs. She does the same for her paternal grandparents, who lived with her parents during the early years of her childhood and who, in their grotesquerie, would have made a fine subject for the photography of Diane Arbus. But it was her father who took Miss Abbott's education in hand, explaining to her the etymology of the phrase "C-note" and turning her loose in his unexpectedly good—for a bookie who had no education beyond high school—library: it included Casanova (her introduction to sex), Gibbon (whom, with his subtext that corruption had been around for a long while, her father loved), Oscar Wilde, Dickens, Somerset Maugham, and much more. "I want you to read," her father told her. She did, and it turned her, in time, into a girl on whom not much was lost. He convinced her that she was extraordinary, and of course there is nothing easier for a child to believe than that.

Miss Abbott is very good at establishing the mildly exotic town of Hot Springs and quite as good at reviving a period, the late forties and early fifties, when, in small towns, prudery prevailed alongside corruption. As an adolescent, she worked in a drugstore, and she reminds us that, in those days, "just coming into a drugstore seemed to embarrass people, seemed always to expose some bodily function or shortcoming or physical need." (How different from today, when one calmly asks for a packet of condoms and shamefacedly requests a packet of cigarettes!) The status importance of clothes and cars is not lost to her. She recalls, too, how much everyone's dream life was connected to the movies. She had herself a crush on Cornel Wilde, though in a touch of retrospective feminudging she recalls admiration for Lauren Bacall. "No crocheted bedspreads for Lauren Bacall," she notes. "There was room for me, I concluded, in this man-getting game."

Only when she became a young woman did Miss Abbott's father begin sorely to let her down. Stirred by his encouragements, she was always an excellent student, which made her an oddity among her classmates, and thought of going to Radcliffe, though her parents, chiefly her father, insisted she stay closer to home, which meant going to Texas State College for Women at Denton. There she became, in his own words, even "weirder—a dingo among poodles." After college, when she

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wanted to go off to live in New York, her father opposed her all the way. The struggles between them grew fiercer. Her father, who had taught her never to depend on a man, now instructed her that every woman needs a husband. Her elegant, intelligent daddy could not learn that most difficult of parental arts, that of letting go. He became a nuisance and an embarrassment, a drag in every way. They met only to argue. "My romance with my father," she notes, after recounting his rather hard-line position on racial segregation in the South, "was definitely over."

Miss Abbott is very hard on her father in his last years. She saves all the virtuous sides of their arguments for herself. In their family drama, she is the queen of the enlightenment, he the prince of damn-near darkness. As he falls into decay, becoming toothless and snarly, she, now free and living in New York ("north toward home," Willie Morris, another Southerner, long ago called Manhattan), hasn't much tolerance for him. "This hateful, sick old bastard who abused my mother was somebody else"—somebody else beside her father, she means. Or is she only saying that, in her freedom, and through the struggle with all it entailed, she has lost all daughterly feeling?

"Daughter," Miss Abbott writes toward the end of her book, "is not a lifelong assignment." I am not sure that she is right about that; son and daughter may be an assignment that continues even after one's parents are dead. Maybe it picks up again especially after death. For proof of this, I put on exhibit Miss Abbott's book with its filial title; without her father, no book. His life made possible this book, which may well be the best thing she ever writes. Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Someone's Put You in Her Autobiography and I'm Feeling So Sad.

If Miss Abbott's upbringing was lower-middle class, threatening to drop lower when her father lost his job owing to a reform candidate running for governor of Arkansas or the Baptists going on a virtue rampage, that of Tim McLaurin, author of *Keeper of the Moon*, was Southern white working-class, in rural to small town North Carolina, and proud of it.[6] McLaurin's people, as they say down South, drove for bakeries,

[6] KEEPER OF THE MOON: A Southern Boyhood, by *Tim McLaurin*. W. W. Norton & Company. $19.95.

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worked construction, ran hardscrabble farms, sold Coca-Cola and Pepsi, and not in suits either but off the truck. Mr. McLaurin, though young to be writing an autobiography, has already, in his thirties, shored up experience out of proportion to his years. In particular, he has the experience all of us who have not gone through it fear: that of cancer. He has had multiple myeloma, a virulent form of cancer of the blood that involved him in the excruciating medical torture called marrow transplant. As Mr. McLaurin's book ends, it is not clear whether he will survive, though the ordeal he has gone through has given him the perspective that only living on close terms with death gives.

Mr. McLaurin's illness takes up only a small portion of his autobiography, which for much the better part is about growing up in the South at slightly below what might be called the K-Mart level of culture, among "hard living people," as he nicely puts it, "who had seen life from all angles except the top." Describing the scenery of his boyhood, Mr. McLaurin writes: "A jet howls overhead, her rockets churning clouds as she lifts and flies to one of those picture places like New York or Paris. It might as well be the moon." McLaurin's turf is a long way from, say, a party at George Plimpton's.

Tim McLaurin grew up in the Southern tradition of the good ole boy, on a small farm that his father worked when not driving a bakery truck. Difficult not to be impressed with the pervasiveness of violence described in McLaurin's pages. Lots of hard drinking and not much small talk in his life. Waylon Jennings, Porter Waggoner, Emmylou Harris playing on the radio in the pickup truck. No shortage of women who "had been backhanded once too often" and seen much pain and sadness. Coon and deer hunting and fishing are the local sports; but so, too, are cockfights and setting pitbull dogs against each other; and let us not forget, just to work out the kinks, crunching barfights. Many men seem to die of lung cancer—all those unfiltered Camels with all those tall cool Buds—or heart attack in their fifties; many others go under in brawls or car accidents; and suicides aren't all that uncommon.

Tim McLaurin has written two novels, which means that he has escaped his environment—as in good part did Miss Abbott—through the magic carpet of the word. "Everyone I

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loved," he writes, "seemed to go on forever wishing and wanting and waiting and waiting. . . . At the ends of their lives, they held on to two or three items of pride and dismissed every other ambition as wishful thinking, nothing more than a dream." Not, somehow, this, for him. A pretty wild ole boy—a collector of snakes, a Marine, a man who likes his booze—he has nonetheless, as he allows, lived under a self-control that many another Southern man of his social class has chosen not to recognize. Where this comes from, he does not know. He was wild but not insane. And then, not long after discovering he had a knack for "stringing words together," he further discovered writing fiction, "a world where I was God, the one in control, where actions and results occurred on my timetable with my results."

McLaurin's autobiography is not without its flaws. He not infrequently lapses into sentimentality, which is often the obverse side of brutality; his book wants pace; it is, in patches, over-written; and at other places padded. But for all this, it feels real and true. This is doubtless owing in good part to the fact that McLaurin is not an intellectual, with that species' gift for distancing itself from reality in favor of ideas; and to the additional fact that, though McLaurin felt the need to escape from the short, often dark lives of the people with whom he grew up, he respects these people and hasn't the least whiff of self-hatred for his origins and never sets himself above them. Although not everyone's notion of paradise, the South where he still lives is a land he continues to love, and his book, which both begins and ends on descriptions of Southern landscape, is a homage to the region in its beautiful, brutal reality. Reality, he reminds us, is "Southern working-class men, expected to hammer out a paycheck, produce children, and hold [their] liquor." Reality is also cancer, and death waiting in the next room. As McLaurin has had to learn before the age of forty, reality also compels us to take life, with all its brutality and injustice, without complaint and make the most of it.

I don't mean to suggest that Tim McLaurin has written a classic autobiography—he hasn't—only that this younger, much less worldly man has written a book propelled by a greater love of life than writers older and more sophisticated than he. He has nothing of Kingsley Amis' spirit of put-down;

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he is far from anywhere near registering the disgust with life that Anthony Burgess has so long lived with; he has had none of the advantages (and disadvantages) of Auberon Waugh's birth; he feels nothing of Ben Sonnenberg's need to kill all over again the dead father; he does not put himself, as does Shirley Abbott, in the position of writing above, and therefore looking down upon, the culture that made him. Through his not yet completed bout with cancer, he has had the unwanted opportunity to look death long in the eye, an experience that, for the right person, can go a long way toward separating the trivial from the significant in life. His book, compared with those of our other autobiographers, is a strong reminder that there is often a vast difference between being well equipped and being well qualified to write about one's life—and that being qualified is better.

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PHILIP LEVINE

Getting There

Early August, hours west of Omaha,
I'd pulled to the side of the road to see
why the car was wobbling and sadly found
a front wheel had sheared off four bolts.
We were out of luck again. Early afternoon,
my youngest son and I hundreds of miles
from the house we'd left and the house
we aimed to find. The big rigs booming
by one after another, shaking the car
loaded with all we had, and the pale sky
riding above, cloudless and distant.
My heart pounded out of some need
to be heard, to address the land
without end, to strike a single chord
that would go on and on the way light
goes on and on seeking the last darkness
or that day went on in western Nebraska
forever in blinding sunlight or until
an old man in a Pontiac four-door stopped
to ask, Was we in trouble? and took us home
where he served buttermilk and crackers
while he phoned up the Ford people
they should see to it fast.
You know how
a six year old blond, small for his age,
with a solemn, pensive air can almost
make your breath catch, your eyes fill
with tears, especially at those times
he will not explain the hidden sources
of his understanding. Such boys ask
for nothing. They simply stand in the center
of so large a place, quiet, accepting.
The old man took his hand as he walked

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us around the borders of his farm, claiming
his ancient rights that sooner or later
the bank would claim. Acres of wheat,
a small garden where the onions were done,
gone to white seeds, the sweet corn
above our heads and rising. Three kinds
of tomatoes, sweet and chili peppers,
kept him busy. Handed up, my boy sat
grimly on the tractor seat holding fast
to the steering wheel as though the world
in its turning might buck him off,
his face fixed and serious. The old man
returned from the barn leading a goat
on a rope, a white goat named Ahab
as though he'd gotten the story wrong.
Teddy stared out over the acres of wheat
stretching all the way to those mountains
we had yet to cross, stared, and would not
begin to smile or come down to earth,
while the great day went on.

To be lost
in the center of America, to be taken in
by a stranger whose needs go unannounced,
to sleep beside your father, what can
it mean at six? He would grow to manhood,
leave home, risk the continent again
in far worse cars. Perhaps the lesson
never took or was no lesson but something else
about the open, wide gaze of a day
under the August sun, the gift of light
bronzing the wheat, the vast chord of sky
rolling across the fields, which answer
with their pips and squeaks. A second day
wakened downstairs with our host
stumbling into chairs, pipes groaning,
the one shrill note of coffee boiling
into bitterness. Perhaps the son saw
his father laugh this day, heard him
clink cups with the old man, and each

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pour from the little screw-top bottle
to make it royal. After that old Aaron
drove us back to the highway, and we
stood beside the Ford miraculously
repaired and exchanged money and addresses
—for a small miracle has its price—.
Now Aaron leans down to the window
to point the way ahead. He calls it west,
he mentions Colorado, the high mountains
snow-capped even now, and says nothing
about music, though the notes are rising
all around us, bird calls, exhaust roars,
the slap-slap of tires, the unheard cries
forming a new song, unheard, that wants
to be sung and won't. Holding up the map
for us, my son points out the roads
inked across the cracked and folded paper.
"Navigator," Aaron says, and Teddy smiles
at last, and now the three of us are laughing
at once, without harmony or reason.

In the Dark

In the last light of a summer day facing the Canadian shore
we watched from the island as night sifted into the river,
blackening the still surface. An ore boat passed soundlessly
trailing a tiny wake that folded in upon itself with a sigh,
unless that sigh was hers or mine. In the darkness it's hard
to tell who is listening and who is speaking. St. Augustine
claimed we made love in the dark—though he did not write
"made love"—because we were ashamed to do it in the sight
of anything, although I suppose God could see in the dark,
having
at least as good eyesight as a cat. Our cat Nellie used to like
to watch my wife and me at love, but she was not a creature

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who generalized and of all things she liked best a happy
household.
"God loves a happy giver," I read in the Abyssinian chapel
on top of the Holy Sepulcher, which suggests the old saint
had no idea what he was talking about, but in the darkness
it's not easy to tell who is talking and who listening, who
giving,
who taking, who praying, who cursing. Even then, watching
from the island, I thought that making love was a form of
prayer.
You got down on your knees, if you were a boy, and
prepared yourself
for whatever the future held in store, and no matter how
firm
your plans without the power of another power you were
lost.
It's so dark back then I can't tell what I'm thinking,
although
I haven't placed my hand on Millie's shoulder for nothing,
nor have I turned my face toward Millie's merely to catch
a reflection of the darkness in her wide, hazel eyes, cat eyes
I called them then. Millie sighs, the ore boat passes silently
to disappear into a future that's still mysterious, I take a
breath,
the deepest breath of my life, and knowing the generations
of stars
are watching from above, I go down on my knees in prayer.

Blue and Blue

In mid-June the light hangs on until I think
the day will never end. At the table, alone,
I place my left hand, palm up, before me
and begin to count the little dry river beds
on the map of my life. One means I will live
until I won't, another means someone else,

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a third means children, a fourth the future's past,
and taken together they mean nothing at all.
I lose the count and turn the hand over to find
four blue streams with nowhere to go. In 1965
in late summer in the harbor of Barcelona
as I went out to sea, I did not know all
this hand could tell me. Overhead the sky darkened
into a blue so deep I thought the world would
break into fire. The evening wind swept from left
to right across the bow, and the waves broke
into blue, and in the deep trough of each wave
ran a current of richer blue. At that moment
I told myself I was not alone, I told myself
the meaning of everything was held in a single drop
of sea water the way all time crowded that moment.
I understood how one human being was everyone.
I must have said it aloud in English, for the man
next to me, a salesman from Argentina, turned
to ask my meaning. The sea was blue and beautiful,
was all I had the courage to say in his language.
He nodded slowly, and a dampened lock of white hair
fell across his brow. Men like that, with eyes
so crimped in wrinkles they can't possibly see out,
know everything. Or at least this one knew a fool
when he heard one, for he shoved his left hand
deeper into his jacket pocket and threw his cigar
into the face of the wind, where for a moment
it became so many meaningless dying fires.
Where was I going? you want to know. To sea.
The way young men in stories go to sea? No.
I worked for an American parts manufacturer
with headquarters in Chicago, I was nearly 38,
with a wife and three kids back in California.
I shared a state room on the good ship *Kangaroo*
bound for Genoa, where I meant to flog bearings,
drive shafts, and universal joints to merchants
far shrewder than I. Actually none of this matters.
When you were just 19 you waited all summer
in Havana for a man to offer you a job

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running guns into Bolivia, and that was how
you made your fortune, found the meaning of life,
and disappeared into cinema. Thus, it's not you
but I who must ask why the sea eats so many fires
or how a drop of salt water contains each moment.
It's hopeless. No one else wonders how each of us
became the other, no one else sits here asking
his own left hand what it holds, while outside
the mourning doves gather in the tall blond grass
under a sky that quickens into blue and blue.

The Old Testament

My twin brother swears that at age thirteen
I'd take on anyone who called me kike
no matter how old or how big he was.
I only wish I'd been that tiny kid
who fought back through his tears, swearing
he would not go quietly. I go quietly
packing bark chips and loam into the rose beds,
while in his memory I remain the constant child
daring him to wrest Detroit from lean gentiles
in LaSalle convertibles and golf clothes
who step slowly into the world we have tainted,
and have their revenge. I remember none of this.
He insists, he names the drug store where I poured
a milkshake over the head of an Episcopalian
with quick fists as tight as croquet balls.
He remembers his license plate, his thin lips,
the exact angle at which this 17 year old dropped
his shoulder to throw the last punch. He's making
it up. Wasn't I always terrified?
"Of course," he tells me, "that's the miracle,
you were even more scared than me, so scared
you went insane, you became a whirlwind,
an avenging angel."

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I remember planting
my first Victory Garden behind the house, hauling
dark loam in a borrowed wagon, and putting in
carrots, corn that never grew, radishes that did.
I remember saving for weeks to buy a tea rose,
a little stick packed in dirt and burlap,
my mother's favorite. I remember the white bud
of my first peony that one morning burst
beside the mock orange that cost me 69¢.
(Fifty years later the orange is still there,
the only thing left beside a cage for watch dogs,
empty now, in what had become a tiny yard.)
I remember putting myself to sleep dreaming
of the tomatoes coming into fullness, the pansies
laughing in the spring winds, the magical wisteria
climbing along the garage, and dreaming of Hitler,
of firing a single shot from a foot away, one
that would tear his face into a caricature of mine,
tear stained, bloodied, begging for a moment's peace.

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JOHN HAINES

In the Sleep of Reason

And so I closed that book,
laid down the pen
and closed my eyes.

What had I thought to find,
reading by the light of cyphers,
abstract and piercing
in their constellations?

Nothing that night and the wind
could not have told me,
had I raised my head,
dimmed my lamp, and listened—

I, a thoughtful man, prone
to the dust of bindings,
coughing in the dry sequence
of verse and chapter
(for I had reasons).

And while I was sleeping,
(for I did doze a while)
came a small beak at my heart,
like a thorn, insistently
probing . . .

And I in terror did wake,
to know in that room
a tread ceaseless and pacing.

As if from within my being
came this upwelling,
of brute and shouldering forms:

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Heavy and beastlike, buoyant
and birdlike, but nothing
I could name, they moved
at ease, about and within me . . .

creatures of the starlight,
but also of the mind,
harbor to wolf and warlock.

So much do I remember now:
the pulse of obedient hearts,
hot tongues licking
the night; and I heard,

like a dry wind over leaves,
the scaly rustling of reptiles
coiling and resting . . .
All turned in the lamplight

eyes that never turned from mine
in their bright interrogation
(for I could see them,
and yet they were not there).

And I would speak, my hand
upheld to shield me,
when the shutter clapped
and my lamp blew out—

(was it a natural wind,
or a spirit-breath
lifting the leaves
of heavy trees in the night?)

And all subsided in the hush
that followed, in the calm
of great wings folding
and shadowy forms lying down.

I rose and left that room,

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the house of my grief
and my bondage, my book
never again to be opened.

To see as once I saw,
steadied by the darkness
in which I walked
and would make my way.

1986–90

A Guide to the Asian Museums

Footbound beneath the owl kings,
princes of darkness and striding priests
who go before us, leading
the dead in their hempen shrouds,

we learned what our crowned,
uneasy fathers learned:

That to be strong you must crush
the darkness underfoot,
break the back of your enemy
and snarl,
raising a fist to the light:

That a stone axe under glass
holds its edge, its weight and purpose:

That a small green scarab,
placed in the grave,
was a better guide in life after death
than the code of the gospels.

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As it was in the Prophet's thronged
and holy city, sun-pillar
and moon-arch will be provided,
straw for the ox
and a tree for the serpent.

And a place at night for the lovers,
tumbled and ruddy with dust,
but who smile and hold each other,
who keep intact
their lesson in abiding passion.

From all our heaped arrangements
to comfort the dead
we have learned this much:

That the least of these fired images,
these flawed souvenirs—items
of rescue, of luck,
obedience and grace—outlast us.

That a single gray elephant,
the size of your thumb,
holds up the earth
with its forests and acres of stones.

1986–92

The Poem without Meaning

"The spittle of the silent stars . . ."
—Gongora

We have been building it for
thousands of years, this emptiness
where grief is blowing,

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a gust from a frozen fountain.
History is now undone, on a field
where red giants and white

dwarfs oppose each other, clash
and bestride the dust.
An immense horse grazes there,

trailing a thread of spittle.
He draws no chariot,
he runs no race, riderless

in the great cloud of himself.
Through a forest of electric trees
comes now an alien force—

a wind off the farthest glacier,
the haunt of huge auguries,
arms whirling, catching at space.

Remember now, St. Luke and the Ox:
how the mute and docile creature
kneeled to be instructed . . .

And as the saint was reading, intent
on his fabulous words, the page
before him burned to a black hole.

There are no more ballads, wiry
and pitched to the stars;
no aerial stages, no strutting boards.

No stretched and glittering figures
with the names of heroes,
heroes with the names of men . . .

All speeches of pith and grandeur
put away with weights and measures
in the deep mind of God.

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Words spoken in the winter of Mars,
in the dusk of Saturn,
compose themselves . . .

The poem becoming Night.

1964–92

Author's Note: "The Poem without Meaning" was published in an earlier version in *The Hudson Review*, Vol XIX, No. 1 (Spring 1966):

We have been building it
for thousands of years,
this emptiness where grief
is blowing, a gust
from a frozen fountain.

Where a man, primitive,
with a cluster of stars
at his shoulder,
moves intently into a deepening
twilight of the ego—

the poem becoming Night.

The story of this poem is largely one of accretion, of an intermittently conscious search for the key to its possible development from this early version. The following incidents and details in one way or another contributed to the poem and may be of some interest:

A postcard photo of the Horse Nebula, and some random study of the better known constellations, the winter figure of Orion being among the most important.

Another postcard photo of a limestone sculpture from an old church in southern France. The card was sent to me by W.S.

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Merwin some time in the late 1960s, and showed St. Luke seated with a book open on his knees, with the head of an ox emerging from the stone and facing him as if listening to whatever it was the saint might be reading.

A quotation from the sixteenth-century Spanish poet, Luis de Gongora. I have forgotten just where in Gongora's poetry I found the phrase.

Some lines from Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, in which Ulysses urges his men toward a destiny beyond the sun in a world without humanity.

Exactly how these elements were to fit into the scheme of the poem and in what sequence I would find difficult to verify other than for the evidence that shows up in the various drafts I have kept with me over the years. I seem to recall working on the poem while living in England in 1977, and thereafter at intervals when I returned to this country. But it has only been within the past year or so that I returned to the poem with the intention of finishing it.

As important as anything to the *thought* in the poem is the intuition that we citizens of this planet may be passing into a new phase of existence, whether for good or ill we cannot know, and which carries with it the possibility of a world devoid of spiritual meaning as we have known it in the past, with the ancient symbols cast into doubt and the constellations merely numbers in a void. I would add to this the thought that beyond the earth imagery of traditional poetry we may have need of a new, or farther, field of imagination.

Finally, a form, a verse structure, that would satisfy me as being consistent with whatever meaning the poem may have. Perhaps here too Dante has been a guide.

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GARY KRIST

From "The Erikson Stories"

Bleeders

The night of my father's first business trip, my mother turned up at my bedroom door around midnight. My light was off, but I wasn't asleep and she knew it. She stood silhouetted in the dimly luminous doorway, wearing her tattered flannel pajamas, her dark hair pulled back into a youthful ponytail. I watched her from the bed through slitted eyes. She had one of her golf clubs with her—a heavy-headed putter, nearly unused, which she held against her shoulder like an infantryman's rifle. In her other hand were two steak knives and the red plastic flashlight from the master bathroom. She seemed to be having difficulty holding onto it all.

My mother sighed pointedly and leaned against the doorjamb. The flashlight clicked on and off, once. She sighed again.

"Can't sleep?" I asked from the shadowy bed.

She nodded. "It's ridiculous, of course. We both know there's nothing down there." She clicked the flashlight on again, playing its beam idly across my desktop, over a pile of textbooks and my collection of plastic Apollo rockets. In the corner beyond the desk was a brass colonial-style lamp that she examined briefly before turning the beam on my face.

"Sorry," she said, dousing the flashlight.

A dark pellet of afterimage floated in front of my eyes. "You heard something downstairs?" I asked her.

"Maybe."

I lay in bed for a few seconds, silent.

"He would say there's nothing down there, wouldn't he?" my mother stated finally.

"You're not really scared," I told her, hoping I was right.

She looked at me oddly, as if considering the truth of what I

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had just said. "The situation," she began, "is what makes me scared. The three of us alone in this house without your father." She pushed away from the doorjamb and stepped toward my bed. "Here," she said, holding out the putter by the shaft. "And I've got some knives for me and Elise. A set your Aunt Rita gave us as a wedding present."

I sat up in bed and reached for the putter. What we were both thinking of—what neither of us would admit to thinking of—was the fact that this same Aunt Rita had been burglarized just three months before. Her house in Riverdale had been broken into by some drunken teenagers looking for vodka and a few things to sell. Rita and her husband Deems had come home from vacation to find the cushions on the sofa slashed, crumbs of glass crackling underfoot as they walked.

"Just for our peace of mind," my mother went on, holding the club a second too long before releasing it to me. The shaft was warm against my palm, not like metal at all. I noticed that my mother was barefoot. "Now let's go wake your sister."

I followed my mother out of the room. We edged quietly along the upstairs corridor and stepped through Elise's half-open door. My sister's room was swimming in a soft, orange glow from the night-light above the bureau. The poorly-taped edges of her posters—lurid group pictures of The Monkeys, The Dave Clark Five—curled away from the walls, throwing small triangular shadows at the corners.

"You won't be able to wake her up," I said then, almost in a normal voice. Elise, two years younger than me, was a heavy sleeper, never easy to rouse.

My mother leaned over Elise's bed and lifted her out from under the covers. "Come on, sweetheart," my mother whispered, setting the small body on its feet. She pressed the handle of a steak knife into my sister's unresponsive hand.

"Let's leave her up here," I said. "She's asleep."

My mother shot me a quick, angry look. "This is something we do together, the three of us. Understand?"

The suddenness of the rebuke surprised me, shut me up. I touched the head of the putter to my sister's cream-colored rug. There were socks—small, white ankle socks—all over the floor.

"Now follow me," my mother said, still whispering. We crept behind her—my sister slowly coming awake—out of the room

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and down the hallway. At the top of the carpeted stairs, my mother stopped us and signaled silence with the steak knife. "Make a lot of noise now," she said then. "Talk to me."

I looked at her blankly. "Won't he hear us?"

"Talking will keep us safe," she answered quickly. "Besides, there's no he to hear us. We're just putting our minds at rest." My mother wet her lips with her tongue. "Now talk," she said. "Tell me about school, your teacher, whatever."

I nodded, took a breath, and then began with the first thing that came to my mind: "OK, this new guy Cory—"

"Louder!" she whispered.

"This new guy Cory counts the Sea Train trucks passing by the classroom window."

My mother nodded at me in encouragement. She began slowly descending the steps, shepherding Elise and me behind her.

"Anderson Avenue is on their route, I guess. He keeps count from lunchtime to three o'clock, and makes a mark on his notebook for each one. I sit behind him."

We reached the bottom of the stairs, already beyond the glow of light from the upstairs hall. My mother turned the flashlight on and put her hand—the handle of the steak knife clicking against her wedding ring—on my sister's narrow back.

"He's from somewhere south," I went on, trying to make my voice sound natural as we moved slowly across the dark living room. "So I told him about going to Grandma's in El Paso, how we all liked it there. And about those spiky yucca plants I liked."

We reached the front closet. Without thinking, I stopped talking when my mother's hand reached out for the knob; I forgot even to lift the golf putter.

She pulled open the door.

"Nothing there," I said after a moment.

My mother played the light up and down the racks of clothing—our winter coats, our torn rubber boots, the box containing the slide projector we never used. They all looked slightly mysterious in the weak light of the flashlight beam, but they were safe, quiet objects, objects we knew.

My mother closed the door. "Of course," she said. Her body seemed to slump in relief. Then, collecting our weapons and pushing them out of sight under the mahogany end table, she took our hands and led us over to the living room. She

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collapsed onto the couch and pulled us down on either side of her. "There, I told you it was nothing." She threw her slender arms over our shoulders. I could smell her then—soap mostly, and that vaguely sweet, wet, woolly scent she always gave off. She seemed almost gleeful now. "Your father's probably sleeping in a hotel room in Oregon by now," she said. She started to hum then—"California, Here I Come," which seemed inappropriate. Then she looked down at me. "God, I feel silly. But that was nice, what you said about Grandma's. That you liked it there. You never told me that before."

I shrugged. "It was interesting."

"You should tell me things more," she went on. "Especially when your father is away like this. We should stick together, like a family. He would want it that way." She looked over at the andirons in the fireplace for a moment, thinking of something. "My brother and I used to talk every night. We slept in the same bedroom of our house in El Paso, the first one, you never saw it. We'd lie in bed, talking across the room." She looked down at me and then, suddenly, unwrapped her arms from us and placed them both on the knees of her black shepherd-check pajamas. "But it's late." She got up from the couch and turned to us. "You two are my valiant protectors."

I found this funny, the thought of me and my half-conscious sister in some way actually protecting my mother from harm. I got up and pulled Elise toward the bottom of the stairs, where my mother stood with one foot on the bottom step. My mother looked very young then, her hair pulled back, the pajama cuffs hanging low over her hands.

After we joined her, she started up the stairs, but then turned suddenly back to us. "Let's not say anything to your father about this when he comes home," she said then. "Cliff, Elise, OK? It'll be one of our secrets."

We both nodded, accustomed to this request. We had lots of secrets, the three of us.

"Now we can all sleep more soundly," she said, as she snapped off the downstairs lights.

It became a ritual after that. Each night before our bedtime, the three of us—weapons in hand—would make the rounds of potential hiding places in the house, talking to each other with

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feigned nonchalance. We would check the kitchen pantry, the utility closet in the dining room, the little room where the washing machine and dryer stood, surrounded by shelves of thick terry cloth towels. It turned into a joke. Each night, the weapons we carried on our rounds would change, becoming increasingly ridiculous. Elise would wield a ceramic teapot, holding it by the spout. My mother would get the old phone receiver from the closet and hold it like a blackjack, while I'd make as if to poke the intruder with the plastic dishdrying rack from the kitchen. The whole routine seemed to amuse Elise primarily. She would giggle uncontrollably, hilarious with half-real fear, as we talked our way toward each closet. My mother would often have to calm her down, taking away her weapon before she really hit or stabbed something with it.

Afterwards, sure of our safety, we would collapse again onto the living room couch. My mother would pull a cigarette from the pack she kept on the side table and light it with her silver lighter. Then she would say the words to us, the ones I always waited for: "See what I mean, kids? Talking will keep us safe."

And that's when we would talk some more, my mother and I—for real now, not just to keep the burglars away. We would slouch against the cushions, Elise falling asleep unobtrusively between us, and just stare straight ahead as if mesmerized by the harvest-gold curtains pulled across the picture window. She would ask me questions—odd questions, like whether I thought of us as a wealthy family, whether I knew the name of the mayor or the Secretary of State, whether I was sad that I didn't have a brother. My mother seemed intrigued by the fact that she could ask me things like this, that I was old enough now to have ideas and feelings that were not put there by her or my father. Sensing this, I tried to answer her honestly. But I didn't yet know what I felt about everything, so I would find myself improvising desires as I sat there. I concocted things—a vivid hatred for a fictional girl in my class, a firm conviction that we as a family were special in some strong but unknowable way. I was afraid that, if my responses were too vague or uncertain, my mother would rise from the couch, stretching in her oversized pajamas, and say, "Well, it's time for bed, I think," which is what she would eventually say anyway. But I figured that as long as I told her things, as long as I could keep her

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listening, we could continue sitting there, safe amid the hissing radiators, the thick carpets and upholstery soaking up our voices in the dark room.

It was on the last night of that business trip—the fourth or fifth night my father was away—that my mother first asked me about God. On our closet-checking rounds that night, we had been talking about new cars, about the '64 Plymouth station wagon my father had his eye on, but now that we had established ourselves on the couch, she turned suddenly to this new topic. "I guess I should know this about you," she said, Elise's sleeping blond head resting against her breast, "but what do you believe? I mean, we never really talk about that, do we."

I turned to her, puzzled. "I thought we were Lutheran," I said.

My mother stared at the burning end of her cigarette. "Well, *you* are, you two kids. In name, at least."

This thought was bizarre to me, that my mother wasn't the same religion as we were. I thought at first that she might be lying.

"I was raised a Catholic," she continued. She closed her eyes and put her head back against the cushions. Her bare feet rested on the kidney-shaped coffee table. "I used to go to Saint Theresa in El Paso. A big orange church on a busy corner." She laughed, a flippant, self-conscious laugh I had never heard before. "I was a passionate little Catholic girl. That was Rosa's doing. She convinced me that the bread was real flesh, and the wine was blood. I shivered every time we took communion." She opened her eyes and looked at me. "We were all supposed to believe in that—transubstantiation—but I don't think most people really did."

"I don't understand," I said quietly.

"All good Catholics are supposed to believe that the bread and wine really, literally, turn into the body and blood of Christ. They call it transubstantiation."

I found myself subtly excited by this idea. I was uncommonly interested in blood at the time—its physical quality of viscousness, its smell. But this fascination embarrassed me, so I said nothing. I just sat there and watched the ash on my mother's cigarette burn down, the paper igniting silently along the edge.

"I used to go every Wednesday afternoon with Rosa, the

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woman who looked after me when my mother was at work. I was your age, I guess. This was long after my father left." She leaned forward and tapped the ash from her cigarette into a ceramic ashtray. "I used to love the smell of that place," she said. "They burned some kind of incense. Blue smoke pouring out of that censer the Mexican priest swung around. I remember watching that, and smelling Rosa's sweaty clothes beside me. It was all so *much* somehow, with the faces in the pictures on the altar." My mother looked over at me suddenly. "But here I am, talking when I'm supposed to be the one asking the questions."

"Why is it supposed to be that way?" I asked, the first words hoarse. "Me answering questions."

My mother didn't respond at first. She looked thoughtful for a second, pulling at the edge of her mouth with the pinky of her smoking hand. I sensed that I had made a tactical mistake. My question had allowed the conversation to take its gentle, inevitable turn toward conclusion. My mother leaned forward and stubbed out her cigarette. "Well," she said, "it's time for bed, I think."

"Not yet," I insisted.

She chuckled softly to herself, staring at me. Then: "Dad's coming home tomorrow. We'll have to get this house back into shape before he does." She got up and slipped her arms under my sister's small body. She breathed once deeply and then hoisted Elise to her chest. "Coming?"

I didn't answer her. I just sat there in the dim light, my body seeming to fill with sadness like a pitcher filling with hot milk.

"We'll talk again tomorrow," she said. "I promise."

I shook my head. "We won't. Tomorrow he'll be back. Tomorrow we won't have to check the closets."

I looked up. My mother was standing over me. She was frowning. She knew that I was right.

My father came back the next evening, shortly before dinner. He had been to Portland, to visit some paper mills for the annual report he was writing. "It's gorgeous up there," he told us as we gathered around him in the living room, ceremonially welcoming him home. "Pine trees, mountains, lakes." My father seemed to have brought home the smell of the Pacific North-

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west—a faint odor of pine that clung to his clothing. He pulled a small wrapped box out of his carry-on bag. "Here," he said, handing it to me, "you won't believe this." He was huffing with enthusiasm, his eyes glassy. My mother sat to his left, watching him, smiling in a sympathetic but uncomprehending way.

"Well open it, Cliff," my father prompted.

I unwrapped the thick glossy paper and pulled off the cardboard lid. Inside was a small stuffed owl—real, by the looks of it—standing on a ceramic log. Its eyes were plastic. Its mottled brown wing feathers looked slippery and fragile.

"It's a bird," my sister said matter-of-factly.

"Not just a bird, sweetheart, an owl. Stuffed." My father took it from my hands and showed her. The thing looked much smaller in his big hands.

"Is it real?" my mother asked.

"That's what they tell me. The plant manager in Hillsboro gave it to me after the tour. Shot it himself in the warehouse one morning. You can feel the bullet hole in the side. Here."

Elise put her finger where my father indicated, under the left wing. She smiled.

"Here, Cliff," my father said, holding the bird out to me again. I touched the spot, which was stubbly and uneven. The whole body seemed to be hollow.

"No thanks," my mother said then, anticipating my father's offer. "Why did he shoot it?"

"I don't know. He says they're like vermin out there. Always getting in where they shouldn't be." My father put the owl down on the coffee table. He reached again into the depths of his luggage. "And I've got something for your mother here." He pulled out another package, much smaller.

"Your father and his presents," my mother said, taking the small box. I could tell that she was pleased. She opened the box and pulled out a small, reddish figure of a turtle, placing it on the palm of her hand. "Another little animal," she observed.

"It's made of pipestone," my father explained. "It's an old Indian charm. A fertility charm."

"Cal!" my mother hissed. She turned her head, as if her face had been hit, and stared at the swinging door to the kitchen.

"Just a little extra help," my father said uncertainly.

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I looked up in bewilderment, first at my mother, then at my father.

"The kids know, Faye," he said. "You knew, didn't you, Cliff?"

A faint comprehension was slowly making its way through my mind, rearranging everything as it went, but I was too startled to answer. No one spoke for a few seconds. Finally, Elise got up from her chair. "I like the turtle better," she said, stepping up to my mother and taking it out of her tightly clenched hand.

We had dinner late that night, giving my father time to unpack. It was eight o'clock before we finished. We sat around the remains of a sauerbraten dinner, which my mother had cooked expressly for his return. "The family reunited," my father kept saying. "I missed you all."

He had coffee after the meal, a special blend he had bought in Oregon. "So," he said as he sipped it, "were you all right here by yourselves? Anything to report?"

"We checked the closets at night," Elise answered without hesitation.

I stopped eating, a forkful of mashed potatoes halfway between my plate and my mouth. I was amazed at the ease of my sister's betrayal.

My father looked at my mother. "You checked the closets?"

My mother shrugged, and then reached across the table to adjust the placement of the saltshaker. "I thought I heard something one night. So we all looked in the hall closet together to check."

"I had a teapot to throw at him," Elise said.

My father was nodding, looking at each of us in turn.

"It became a game after a while," my mother explained.

My father paused and wiped his mouth with a red cloth napkin. "Well that's fine," he said, "but I want you kids to know that you're all safe in this house, whether I'm here with you or not. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"They know that," my mother said, so quietly that we barely heard.

"You understand me, Elise? Cliff? You're protected. What happened to Aunt Rita won't happen here. And your mother knows that."

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"Of course," my mother said to the saltshaker. "It was just a joke. Like telling ghost stories. Nothing."

"Like a haunted house," Elise said, tickled with this idea. She held up her fork and waved it at my mother. "Mommy thought the house had a ghost."

After dinner, my sister and I were lying on the floor in the upstairs TV room, watching our old black-and-white Magnavox. My mother was behind us, ironing at the board permanently set up beside the half-full bookcases. She seemed pensive now that my father was home. The steam iron sighed in her hand like a sorrowful animal.

At a commercial break, I got up for something to drink. I ran down the carpeted steps to the first floor, not noticing my father in the living room until I was right on top of him. He was sitting in a single, amber-colored pool of light, examining the owl he had brought home. He was wearing a white oxford cloth shirt open at the neck, so that tufts of his graying chest hair showed over the fastened button. The sleeves were turned up twice to reveal his bulbous forearms.

"I'm getting something to drink from the kitchen," I said, feeling that some explanation was necessary.

My father reached across the coffee table, his salt-and-pepper hair glinting in the light. "Here," he said. "Use my glass. Save Mom the trouble of washing an extra."

I took the empty tumbler from his hand. Outside, rain had started, pattering the windows. "You know," he began then, looking down again at the stuffed owl. He held it like a shot-put in his hand, testing its weight. "There's something to be said for a place where animals like this can be a problem, a pest. Noble birds of prey."

I nodded, not sure what kind of response he expected.

He looked up at me and said, "Sit down a minute?"

I didn't want to. I was in the middle of a show. Already, I could hear its bright, phony laugh track upstairs, muffled by the distance. But I obeyed, as I always did, lowering myself onto the chair across from him.

"This trip I just took," he began, placing the owl on the coffee table and leaning back, "is going to be the first of many, I'd guess. This company I'm writing for has plants all over the

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country. I'll be gone—" He stopped himself then, and began again: "Your mother," he said, "is sort of a fearful person." I saw his eyes cut up to mine quickly to see if his words had caused any visible reaction. "I don't mean this as any criticism of her or of anybody. God knows, there are a lot things to be afraid of in this world." He placed his blunt fingers together and tapped them—once, twice—before continuing. "But there are different ways of looking at the world, or approaching . . . matters of substance."

I stared down at the carpet. I could hear him breathing. My father was always a heavy breather. A husky man.

"I want you to grow up ready to grab the world by the balls, if you know what I mean. A boy needs someone to teach him. Me being away sometimes could be a problem."

"It's not a problem," I said. I began to get up, but my father put his hand out to stop me.

"Don't be timid," he said then, almost fervently. His hand gripped my forearm. "I want you to remember not to be timid. Your mother . . . " He stopped again mid-sentence.

"OK," I said finally, letting the subject drop.

My father was watching me carefully. Then his eyes softened. "OK is right," he said, laughing. He took a handful of my shirtfront and twisted it playfully, so that the shirttails pulled out of my waistband. "I love you, Cliff," he said. "Remember *that* too."

"I will."

My father smiled. He put his arm around me and squeezed me tight against his chest. "You've got your mother's eyes," he said then, boozily.

The next day, my mother picked us up from school in our light blue Impala. It was a brisk November afternoon. Fingers of dark cloud scudded across a gunmetal sky. My mother, in her ginger-colored winter coat, had pulled a thin plaid scarf over her head. She wore dark sunglasses and enormous suede gloves—men's gloves, belonging to my father.

"A slight change in procedure today, kids," she said, checking her rearview after we got in and slammed the doors. "Elise, honey, I'm dropping you off at Francis' for an hour or two, OK? Cliff and I have an errand to run."

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This was the first I'd heard of any errand. But there was something unusual in my mother's voice—an artificial, songish tone that kept me from saying anything. Elise's comment to my father about checking the closets, perhaps, had changed things; my mother now realized that Elise could not be told everything.

We drove from the school to Aunt Francis' house, the silence between my mother and me conspicuous as Elise prattled on about recess and mucilage. Aunt Francis—not our real aunt, but just a close friend of my parents—lived a few blocks away from us, in a house surrounded by bony forsythia bushes. "Go right in, Elise. Francis will have something for you to do."

Elise, expelling an exaggerated sigh, got out of the car without another word. We watched as she stepped up to the front door, trailing her bookbag behind her. After a moment, Aunt Francis opened the door. She peered out at us, waved, and then bundled Elise into the house.

"I told Francis I needed you to carry something from the hardware store, something for Dad's birthday," my mother said, her eyes invisible behind the dark green lenses. "But we're going somewhere else." She put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb.

"Where are we going?" I asked finally, after it became clear that she wasn't going to continue on her own.

She didn't take her eyes off the road. "Church," she said.

After a few minutes, we pulled up across the street from a large, black-brick Catholic church in a part of town I didn't know. The enormous building stood at the top of a flight of concrete steps. Its weatherworn facade, without decoration except for a round stained-glass window over the doorway, seemed to rise ominously above the street, topped by a plain white cross that was almost obscured by crisscrossing telephone wires. A sign beside the door read "St. Nicholas Church."

"I thought you might be interested," my mother said then. Her gloved hand was on the ignition key, waiting for a sign from me. "If you're not, we can just go home."

I looked across at the mountainous church for a moment before saying, "I'm interested."

My mother's hand turned the ignition key, silencing the engine.

We got out of the car and crossed the busy street. My mother

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took my hand as we climbed the cracked steps and pushed open the heavy wooden front door. Suddenly, we were inside, out of the cold, in what seemed almost total darkness and quiet. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, but when they did, I could make out a long aisle surrounded on both sides by empty pews. At the end of the aisle was a raised area, punctuated by wooden pulpits, a few bunches of flowers in standing vases, a statue. The church was entirely empty of people.

I dropped my mother's gloved hand. On a stark metal rack beside the entrance stood scores of candles, in every stage of burning.

"This is the nave," my mother whispered, her voice alarmingly loud in the echoing vault of the church. She pulled off her sunglasses, scarf, and heavy gloves and stuffed them all into the deep pockets of her overcoat. "There's no mass today, but we can at least have a look around."

I nodded and peered out into the gloom. The damp, open space smelled musty, waxy, exotic. I had never been inside a Catholic church before, and was amazed, above all, by the darkness. The Lutheran church I'd attended a few times in first grade was light, full of blond wood and clean white walls and modern rest rooms with dishes of baking soda instead of soap.

"Take off your hat."

I quickly pulled off my navy wool cap. I grasped it in my hand, squeezing it as—my mother moving suddenly—I followed her down the long aisle of the church. I was wearing sneakers, but she wore black shoes that creaked as we made our way toward the altar. The whole building seemed to fan around us as we walked. The vaulted ceiling seemed impossibly high overhead, lost in the shadows.

My mother stopped at the bottom of the steps leading up to the altar. There were two long tapers on the marble slab, surrounding a dark painting. Jesus was barely visible in the painting, a pale figure nailed on the cross in an awkward, unnatural position, posed against a dramatic mackerel sky. Above the picture, an abstract stained-glass window glowed faintly.

My mother made the sign of the cross, her fingertips touching four places on her body. I wondered whether I was expected to do the same, and even began raising my right hand

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to my head, but I stopped short, at around chest level. I didn't know how to do it, really, and my mother wasn't watching me. She was staring up at the painting of Jesus above the altar.

"I've always wondered what the inside of this place looked like," my mother said then, as much to herself as to me. "Not the same at all."

I heard the creak of her shoes a few feet away before I realized that she had moved from my side. She was making her way toward a side chapel. Another, smaller rack of candles stood beside an iron grate here. I watched my mother reach into her pocket and step up to the rack. A coin fell into the box—making a metallic thud of such clarity and volume that I expected someone to emerge from the shadows, looking angry at the noise.

I stepped quickly toward her. By the time I had reached her side, she had taken a white candle out of the bin and was lighting it from the flame of another that had burned almost to the bottom. "You have to pay?" I asked her.

She glanced sideways with a little grin on her face. "You have to pay," she said. She pushed the bottom of the candle onto an empty spike on the rack. She brushed the curls of wax from her fingers and then spent a moment staring at the burning taper, looking satisfied.

My mother began unbuttoning her overcoat. I thought this meant that we were going to stay for a while, maybe a long while, in that dark church. "Mom," I began, but she silenced me with a finger to her lips. She stepped over to the black prayer rail and—awkwardly, almost as if she had to force herself to do it—knelt. I felt something like panic rising in me as I watched this behavior. She clasped her hands together, fingers interlacing, and pressed them against her forehead. Her lips began moving silently. I turned away and stared around the church, mortified that someone might see her. When I heard the dull impact of the door closing at the back of the church, I couldn't help myself; I stepped up to my mother's kneeling figure and pushed her shoulder. She looked up at me, her eyes red and surprised, as if I had just woken her. "Someone's coming," I whispered to her.

She stood up quickly, gathering her overcoat around herself, her thin, cold fingers groping for the buttons. She looked as

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guilty as I did. Coughing once, she grabbed my wrist and we started walking up the side aisle toward the back of the church. We could see the people who had come in—two ancient, white-haired ladies, both dressed in deep black. They were helping each other down the central aisle. "It's Angela," I heard one of them whisper in a loud, hissing voice. Then the taller one waved. "Hoo, Angela!" she said, her voice reverberating in the rafters above.

My mother stopped short. She was about to open her mouth, to tell the woman that she was mistaking us for someone else, but she said nothing. She nodded at the two women.

"How's your aunt, dear? Better?"

My mother made a vague gesture with her free hand. "Much better, thank you," she said, grasping my wrist to silence me.

The two old women bobbed their heads. Then the taller one spoke again: "Tell her we were asking about her. It's Lucille and Antonia. She'll know. Send her our love."

"I'll tell her that, thank you," my mother said. "God bless you." She started walking again, pulling me along beside her, up the side aisle. Just as we reached the back of the church, I heard the taller woman's raspy stage whisper again: "I heard it was breast cancer. Such a terrible, terrible thing."

My mother's lips were pursed as we made our way down the concrete steps toward the car. She hadn't bothered to put her scarf back on. Her hair moved like a sea creature in the sharp wind. I had a hard time keeping up with her as she crossed the street.

"Well, Cliff," she said when we had settled into the car again. Her cheeks were flushed. I could see tiny dots of refection in the whites of her eyes. "That was something, wasn't it?"

"Why did you pretend to be that other woman?" I asked, appalled by what I had just seen.

"Oh, I don't know. They were trying to be kind." She leaned forward and turned the ignition, revving the engine twice to warm it up. "But they were cute, weren't they, those two old women? Old Catholic ladies."

I said nothing, just stared out the window at a dime store on the corner opposite the church. Two or three blots of rain hit the windshield. "What did you pray for?" I asked finally.

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My mother pulled her overcoat tighter around her neck. She heaved a deep breath. "I prayed that things would turn out all right," she said. "The way your father wants them to."

That last sentence made me turn back to her. "The way *he* wants them to?" I asked.

She paused a moment before going on. "Yes, the way *he* wants them to," she answered finally. "Besides, it doesn't matter what you pray for. It's the way praying makes you feel."

She got out a cigarette and lit it with her lighter, the tobacco crackling as it ignited. "And it made me feel pretty damn good," she said then, smoke coming out of her mouth with each word.

The noises were emanating from my parents' room again that night. I lay in bed, listening, trying not to listen, as I had done for several weeks now, before and after my father's trip. How will they know when it has happened? I wondered. Or do they know already? Is this just my father compulsively making sure—making sure that things turned out the way he wanted them?

A late harvest moon was pouring light into my window, turning everything the color of parchment. I kept staring at my glowing beige sweater on the chair across the room, willing it to move.

The noise stopped shortly after midnight. I turned over in bed and pulled the blanket up to my neck. The image of blood, of wine turning into blood, wheeled through my mind. I thought of the neighbor's dog that had once been run over in our street, an old dachshund with a cloudy eye. The back tire of the car had rolled over its hindquarters. I remembered seeing it afterwards. It was still alive, lying at the edge of the curb, looking around almost nonchalantly while a fan-shaped pool of blood spread out from its abdomen.

Did my mother not want this? I asked myself. Was he making her do this against her will?

I turned over again. Outside, the wind gusted, rolling dead leaves on the back lawn with a sound like running water. The sound blended with another—footsteps on the landing outside, footsteps descending the stairs. Someone was up, probably my mother. I got out of bed.

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A light went on downstairs as I crossed my bedroom to the door. I stood in the doorway and listened. The sound of a cigarette lighting would reveal the identity of the person downstairs. My father used book matches—a snap followed by a faint hiss; my mother, on the other hand, had a silver lighter that made a metallic clink and then two or three sibilant scrapes. I waited a full minute for either sound.

Finally I decided to chance it. I crossed the dark hallway and took the first few steps downstairs. The living room revealed itself to me gradually. I saw my mother on the couch in her flannel pajamas. She was lying back in a ball, hugging her knees up to her chest, her face buried.

I stopped short on the stairs. She began stuffing pillows under her to elevate her hips. For a moment, I thought that my father might have hurt her, that she was lying on the couch that way to soothe an aching back. But she didn't seem hurt to me, just absorbed in what she was doing.

I took another step down the carpeted staircase. She must have heard me, because her face shot up, impossibly white. Her eyes looked like those of an animal caught in headlights.

"Hi," I said uncertainly. "You want to talk now?"

"Go to bed!" she hissed at me. "For God's sake, Cliff, go to sleep!"

The Impala pulled up in front of our school as usual the next afternoon. Elise and I pulled open the doors and got in, muttering our greetings. It wasn't until I was settled inside that I realized it was my father behind the wheel.

"Dad?" I said. Until that time, my father had rarely picked us up at school. That was one of my mother's jobs.

"Mom is sick," he told us. He was paler than usual, and almost unbelievably subdued for my father—all of which, along with his words, sent a jagged slice of fear through me.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"She's all right. The doctor's been already and he says she's all right."

"She's all right," Elise repeated from the back seat, turning the words into a charm.

We pulled away into traffic, my mind racing from one awful possibility to another. After a few seconds, I became aware of

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my father looking at me sidelong between glances at the road. "She was in church when she took sick," he said carefully. "St. Nicholas Church. Know anything about that?"

I moved my tongue inside my mouth. "No," I said finally.

My father nodded slowly, taking note of the lie.

We pulled up to the house at last. Unraked leaves littered the wet lawn. I got out of the car and slammed the door. "Go up and see her, both of you," my father said through the closed window.

I went inside and climbed the stairs to my parents' bedroom, leaving Elise at the front closet shouldering out of her coat. My mother was lying in bed, surrounded by magazines. She looked up when she heard me, then down again almost immediately. Her hair was loose around her shoulders.

Something told me not to go near her. "Are you sick?" I asked from across the room.

She lifted her head and pulled a wet strand of hair away from her cheek. "Fine, fine." Her voice was low, unrecognizable.

A blue dress—the dress my mother had been wearing that morning—was soaking in the master bathroom. I could see a drowned sleeve of it draped over the edge of the sink.

"I should have told you," my mother was saying then. "If we had talked about it, it would have been all right."

The words seemed lost in the dense air, in the metallic scent of blood that hung, sodden and thick, in the room.

"Cliff . . ."

My father was in the room now, behind me. I didn't turn to look at him, but I could see his presence in my mother's closing face.

"There's no reason to be afraid, Cliff," he said, placing his big hands on my shoulders. I could feel him—the insistent heat of him—on my back. "We'll try again," he whispered, as if to reassure me, as if I were an accomplice in the violence he had done her. "She's a little shaken up, but there's nothing to stop us from doing this again."

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Giant Step

My mother announced her intention to find a job on the night the Apollo 11 astronauts landed on the moon. She and my father had roused us from our beds at 1:00 A.M. and carried us bodily to the couch in front of the new color television. "This is world history," my father had informed Elise and me, arranging blankets around our legs even though it was mid-July. I'm glad he said that, because his words forced me to pay attention. "This is world history," I repeated as I watched that bulky white figure bounce around on the screen. I forced my groggy brain to lock in on that image. Even so, the thing I remember most vividly about the broadcast was that the reception was terrible.

It was after the moonwalk—after the staticky voice had spoken its famous line—that my mother made her announcement. "I was thinking of finding some kind of employment," she said, curled up in the tattered armchair. She was drinking a mug of strawberry tea. I could see her staring at the three of us through the rising steam, checking our reactions to this idea. "You know, a job. Once you kids go back to school in September."

My sister Elise began to cry quietly.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," my father said quickly. He, who seemed to be as surprised as we were, was bouncing around the room like that astronaut on television, turning off lights, resettling cushions in armchairs. "We'll have a family meeting after dinner, OK? Until then, we should all think about the incredible thing we've just witnessed tonight, OK?"

We went to bed again soon after the broadcast. My father, tapping his watch loudly, insisted upon it. But I couldn't fall asleep for hours. My mind kept racing. That night, a new chapter in the history of humankind had begun, but all I could think of was one thing: My mother wanted to find a job.

The family meeting began at 6:30 the next evening, after dinner. We all sat around the empty fireplace in the living room—my sister, my parents, and me—prepared to discuss. My

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father, a big man with a barrel chest and coarse, salt-and-pepper hair, was the first to speak.

"This idea of your mother's," he began, talking into his steepled fingertips, "is good. I mean, I think it's a great idea for her to expand a little bit." He got up from the chair and stepped toward the starburst clock over the mantel. "New possibilities, new attitudes, new—"

"What we want to know," my mother interrupted, "is how you kids would feel about it."

My father frowned. "Right," he said.

I turned to Elise, my stare forbidding her to cry again. But she seemed more composed than she had been the night before. "Would you still be able to pick us up at school?" she asked. My sister was going into fifth grade in the fall, at the local grammar school about a mile away from our house. I'd be starting junior high, which in our town was called Intermediate School.

My mother seemed relieved by Elise's question. "We'd arrange it so either your father or I would pick you up. You know, Dad's writing jobs give him a lot of flexibility. We're an unusual family in that respect." She paused. Her eyes shot from Elise to me to Elise again. "Of course, when he's traveling, we may have to arrange something with Aunt Francis every now and then."

"What about you, Cliff?" my father said. "Do you have anything to say?"

I did. "What would you *do*?" I asked, letting a little too much blatant incredulity leak into the question that, frankly, had been nagging me for almost twenty hours.

"Well," my mother said, "Aunt Helene thinks she'll need somebody at the candle store once school starts. I could begin with that. But eventually I want to move on to something . . . better."

"A lot of women are working these days," my father added. "Look, the new prime minister of Israel is a woman, right? It's a new world out there. This will be good for Mom."

I tried to imagine my mother working in the Candle Corner, a small, cramped storefront on Anderson Avenue. It was filled with candles in the shape of mushrooms, candles in the shape of high-topped shoes, candles in the shape of peace signs, and

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it always reeked of lavender and rose. Our Aunt Helene made everyone who worked for her wear a frilly red apron.

"How long will you have to work there before you find something else?" I asked.

"Not long."

"Your mother's on the way." My father was rubbing his hands together, a desperately optimistic look brightening his face. "This'll be good, this'll be good for all of us," he said, trying to sound convincing.

School started that September—as it seemed to start every year—on a dark, rainy morning shaken by gusty winds. It had been a long August, during which my mother, who had previously been satisfied wearing my father's old cast-off clothing, bought an entirely new wardrobe. She now had a closet full of flowery dresses, pleated skirts, and pumps in shades unknown to nature.

"How do I look?" she asked me on that first day. She wore a long grayish dress patterned with small daisies, topped with a white lace collar. The look reminded me of wagon-train women—the ones who churned butter and spun thread and could shoe a horse in a pinch.

"Great," I lied.

"Well, good, because I'm too late to change."

She piled us into the car, Elise in the front and me in the back. My sister and I were completely silent on the drive to school, each of us succumbing to that heart-squeezing combination of dread, excitement, and nervousness that the first day of school always inspired. The fact that my mother was starting a job that same day just made the feeling sharper, more piquant. My sister and I were rabid social conservatives, constitutionally hostile to change.

We stopped at Elise's school first—what had been *my* school, too, until this year—and let her off. "Dad will be waiting here at three," my mother assured her, kissing the top of her head. We watched my sister slam the car door and step hesitantly toward the front of the colonial brick building.

"Now get up here, Cliff," my mother said then, without looking back at me. "I want to talk."

I climbed over the headrest into the front seat.

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She gave me a comic panicky look. "I'm nervous," she began.

I didn't answer her right away. I just stared down at the virgin notebooks in my lap, each one emblazoned with my name in black Magic Marker. School.

"I've never done anything like this before," she went on. She reached into the pocket of her new wool jacket for a cigarette, but then decided against it. "I *did* work in high school, I guess. I babysat for a lot of neighbors in El Paso. But nothing like this."

"You're selling candles, Mom. It won't be hard."

This hurt her. She didn't speak for a minute or so afterwards—to punish me. She pretended to concentrate on traffic.

"I'm nervous, too," I said finally.

My mother made no reply to this. She merely nodded at the road in front of us, pursing her lips, silently accepting the apology.

We pulled up in front of the Intermediate School. It was a nondescript modern building, flat and bunker-like, with newer wings at both ends whose orange brick didn't quite match the brick of the original structure. There were crowds of seventh and eighth graders milling around the front steps. I recognized none of them.

We sat in the car a moment, just gazing at the building pensively. "You'll be stopping at that church on the way over to Aunt Helene's?" I asked then.

Her head snapped toward me. It had been understood in the family that my mother hadn't been to church in several years, since her miscarriage. I'd always suspected otherwise.

My mother, still staring at me, heaved a sigh and then reached for her cigarettes again. "Sometimes I think you can read minds," she said, almost resentfully.

"Like Mr. Spock."

"Like Houdini, is more like it." She crushed the cigarette she had just taken out of the pack and tossed it into the back seat. "Might as well change that habit, too," she said petulantly. She brushed flakes of pale tobacco from her fingertips. "While I'm at it."

My father was late picking us up that afternoon. I eventually decided to walk home with my friends Kyle and Peter, but my

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sister stood in front of her school for forty-five minutes before he arrived. She was furious. At dinner that night, she stirred the green beans around her plate with an expression of passionate indignation on her face. My father had already been through his excuses. He'd been tied up at a meeting, an important meeting with the president of the chemical company whose annual report he was writing. This explanation, however, did not satisfy my sister. Elise's sensitivity to injustice was extraordinarily refined.

"So nobody's really said much about their first day," my father said then. When no one seemed inclined to respond, he turned to me. "You first, Cliff," he said.

I paused before answering. My day had been overfull, stuffed with novel impressions—of my tall, resonant metal locker, of the buzzing cafeteria, the industrial arts room, the science lab with actual marble-topped tables and Bunsen burners. I had walked through the halls all afternoon in a trance-like state, trying to grasp my new territory. People said hello to me as I passed, people I had hardly counted among my friends at School 4. My happiness had astonished me.

"It was good," I said finally. "Different. My shop teacher is insane."

My father was nodding his head. "You're taking shop now," was all he said. He stole a quick glance at Elise and then looked up at my mother. "And you, Faye? Mom? How was your day?"

My mother, who had been strangely quiet ever since she got back from work at five-thirty, took a sip of orange juice before noticing the question. "Probably not as interesting as your day, Cal," she said, in a voice so odd that even Elise looked up from her plate to make sure it had issued from my mother's lips.

"What do you mean?" my father asked.

"Just what I said." My mother licked her lips once and threw a fistful of hair back behind her shoulder. "No, not nearly as interesting as yours." She put her palms flat on the table in front of her. The knuckles seemed red and swollen. "And anyway," she added finally. "I quit."

The jobs followed in rapid succession after that. She tried some secretarial work first, answering phones for a company in Ridgefield that made car batteries, but left after a week. For a

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while she tried selling antique clocks at Bamberger's, then lingerie at Alexander's, and eventually resorted to that standby of all suburban wives, real estate. But she quit each new job with a breezy casualness that left all of us feeling slightly breathless. My mother was not herself, it seemed; she was itchy, impatient, distracted. I remembered what she had said the first morning of school, about my being able to read her mind, so I would sit across from her in the TV room—while we were supposed to be watching "Laugh-In" or "Bonanza"—and try to get a bead on her thoughts. Once she caught me at it. "What are you staring at, Cliff?" she asked testily.

"Your hair," I improvised. "It seems darker."

"Nice of you to say so, but it's going gray if anything."

The only job that seemed to give her any satisfaction at all was bookbinding. Somewhere between car batteries and antique clocks, she had taken up with a master bookbinder named Orson. She had seen Orson's ad for an assistant in the newspaper one morning and, without pausing to consult any of us, had given him a call. She had no experience, of course, but he hired her the next day, agreeing to train her in lieu of pay for the first month.

Orson was an extremely tall man—six-foot-seven, at least—thin, oldish, and utterly incapable of looking a person in the eye. He kept his coarse, gray hair closely cropped, a hairstyle that exaggerated the deep lines radiating from every sense organ on his head, even his ears. He wore rumpled wool suits and frayed ties. I saw him for the first time on the day after Christmas, and I hated him instantly.

But my mother seemed determined to find Orson tolerable, even likeable, so she started working at his studio three mornings a week. After her training period, Orson talked her into buying her own screw press so that she could work at home. My father, sensing the importance of this, agreed to foot the bill. He even helped my mother set up the awkward wooden press in the basement near the deep freezer.

"I've come with another assignment for Mrs. Erikson," Orson said one snowy day, turning up at our doorstep with a ratty cardboard box full of uncut pages and strips of glove leather. We all stared at him as he moved majestically over the threshold, his enormous galoshes streaking slush across the carpet.

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"Orson!" my mother called out, appearing suddenly in the living room. She snatched the box from his fragile arms. "Thank God you've come. I'm almost done with that awful family history thing you gave me last week." My mother had been spending hours in the basement, stooped over her screw press. She had left us to fend for ourselves at meals all week, though no one dared to object. She was a bookbinder now. She had even begun to smell of paper dust, library paste, and potassium lactate.

Then, just as early spring rolled around, my mother heard about a job at Jungle Habitat. Jungle Habitat was a zoo about forty-five minutes northwest of our house. It was, according to the ads, a new concept in zoos—a vast enclosed area that people could drive through to observe wildlife. The animals walked around freely; if you were lucky, they would walk right up to your car and stare into your side windows. Some animals—gibbons, for one—would actually climb up on your roof and jump around, making a metallic pounding noise that was more terrifying than anything the tigers or panthers could do.

The particular job my mother had her eye on was an assistantship in the petting zoo. She had found the position listed in the want ads under the heading "Animal Handler," which told me how hard she must have been looking, even though Orson was keeping her as busy as he could. My mother seemed to think the job was perfect for her. My parents both professed to be animal lovers (although my father's allergies prevented us from ever having a pet of our own). My mother had even volunteered years ago at an animal shelter in her Texas hometown. She figured that this at least gave her some relevant experience. She was right. The zoo hired her immediately, sight unseen.

She had to wear a uniform: a navy blue jumpsuit with the Jungle Habitat logo—a highly stylized zebra—stitched over the left breast pocket. She pinned her dark hair up whenever she wore it, stuffing the loose ends into a matching navy blue cap with a longish brim. I remember thinking that my mother looked like a janitor in the outfit, a very slender, very pretty janitor.

"So it sounds like you've found something you like," my

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father said to her one morning over breakfast. It was the beginning of her second week at the zoo.

"Finally," she said, completing his sentence.

"I wasn't going to say that."

My mother got up from the table. "But you were thinking it," she said, carrying her cereal bowl to the sink. "We all were thinking it."

My father lowered his coffee cup from his lips. He seemed about to say something, but stopped himself. I caught him sneaking a glance at me. "None of us thought that," he said finally.

It was the type of exchange that was becoming increasingly common in our house. This new, prickly mother of the last six months was still something of a mystery to us all. I guess I accepted it as an inextricable part of my mother's new incarnation as working woman. But I could tell that my father was puzzled by it. And disturbed. And, strangely, nervous.

One day after school in mid-May, Aunt Francis came to get me at the Intermediate School. The daily pickup had by this time turned into a lottery—sometimes my father would show up, sometimes Aunt Francis, more rarely my mother. I had already decided that next year I would take the school bus home.

Aunt Francis was unusually prickly herself that afternoon. "Watch out for those clothes hanging in the back!" she shouted at me as I got into the back seat of her station wagon. Elise was already in the front. "I just got them back from the cleaners and if you knock them off the hook I'll crown you. Your Uncle Bob is taking me out to dinner tonight."

Aunt Francis was wearing a headful of blue plastic curlers covered by a flowery kerchief. I saw Elise examining the curlers intently. "What, are they falling out?" Aunt Francis asked, patting her kerchief.

"We're going to see Mom," Elise informed me then. "At work."

"I can't believe your mother wants me to bring you all the way out there," Aunt Francis said. She started pulling away from the curb but then stopped short, nearly throwing me into the front headrest. "All right, wise guy. I see you, I see you." She made a gesture of annoyance at the car that pulled by slowly on

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our left. "It's my anniversary, you know. That's why your uncle is taking me out."

"Happy anniversary," I said.

"Thank you." She threw the car into gear again, made a U-turn, and started off for the strange, exotic highways to Jungle Habitat.

She dropped us off at the front gate. "Your mother says to tell the cashier who you are and they won't charge you admission," Aunt Francis said. "Now scoot. I've still got my eyebrows to do."

We got out of the car and watched Aunt Francis zoom away. "So this is where Mom works," I said to Elise as we stood at the front gate, looking up at the plywood representations of giraffes and zebras over the turnstiles. The cashier's booth had a thatched roof and was made of concrete painted to look like mud.

Elise shook her head. "She'll want me to touch the animals, won't she," she observed bitterly.

The cashier, a chubby blonde girl not much older than me, circled the petting zoo on a map and pointed us in the right direction. On the way there, we passed three parking lots, a handful of concession stands selling stuffed toys and Italian ices, and a small enclosure containing something that looked like a giant rat.

"There you are, at last," my mother called out when we reached the dirt-floored corral of the petting zoo. She had her arm around a tiny, chestnut-colored colt that seemed to have trouble coordinating its ridiculously thin, insectile legs. She was trying to feed it from a bottle. "Come on and meet Pumpkin."

My sister and I stepped over to her, though we stopped about six feet away. The colt seemed to be in a kind of feeding frenzy, poking desperately at the nipple of the bottle with its long, mobile lips. "Take it easy now, little one," my mother crooned. She looked up at us, a broad smile on her flushed face, and said: "He's hungry."

Later, she showed us around the petting zoo, introducing us to animals and colleagues in the same tone of voice, as if there were no distinction between life forms. Then, after she punched out, she asked us if we wanted to drive through the

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habitats before going home. "Sure," I said, knowing that this was the response she was looking for.

We joined the sparse line of cars winding through the pseudo-African savannah. Most of the animals we saw—baboons, antelope, lions in the distance—seemed to be asleep. "It's still early," my mother told us, biting her lip. "They usually get more active around dusk." Elise, ostentatiously bored, got out her social studies textbook and started her homework in the back seat.

We passed into another habitat that seemed more active. White goats were gathered around the car in front of us, begging potato chips from a hand at the back window. "They shouldn't feed them," my mother said huffily. She hit the horn twice. This scattered the goats for a moment, but they soon reconverged on the same car. One of them started chewing on the back tire. When the driver saw that, he hit his own horn, but the goats didn't move. Finally, he put the car into gear and raced forward, screeching his tires on the roadway.

I looked over at my mother. "What are you *doing* in a place like this?" I asked her.

"What do you mean, a place like this? It's where I work now." She shifted the car into drive and pulled up among the goats.

"You really like this?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "It's easy, I guess," she answered after a moment. "And gratifying. You feed the animals and they love you. It's simple."

Just then, a hairy, blind-eyed, incomprehensibly stupid face appeared at the window next to me and began gumming the glass.

My mother watched it, then turned to me again and swallowed. "It's like having babies again," she said.

Three days later, my mother called me in from the backyard. It was after dinner. The sun was sinking lower in the sky, illuminating clouds of gnats over the back lawn.

"I want you to come with me," she said, handing me my jacket.

"Where?" I asked.

"Someplace special."

My father was upstairs watching the news. "Cal, could you

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keep an eye on Elise for an hour or so?" my mother called up to him.

"Sure. Where you going?"

"Cliff and I are going shopping," she said, staring at me with eyes that forbade contradiction.

We got into the car and started driving. When my mother veered onto Route 17, I knew where we were headed. "You're taking me to work?" I asked her.

"The zoo will be closed. But there's a place I want you to see."

We drove—mostly in silence—to the Jungle Habitat. I looked out the window as we drove past the closed front gate, a wall of metal bars drawn down over the entrance. At a booth just beyond the main parking lot, my mother turned off onto a small service road that paralleled the high wooden fence. We drove another quarter of a mile, passing a wide, grassy field and some wooden outbuildings surrounded by chicken wire. Finally, she pulled the car to the side of the road, a few feet away from the high fence, and turned off the engine.

"The lion compound is just on the other side of the fence here," she said, not looking at me. "Sometimes you can hear them roaring at this time of day."

I took a deep breath and waited—not for the roaring, but for whatever it was my mother had to tell me.

"Your father's having an affair, Cliff," she said finally, looking down at her hand resting on the steering wheel. "It's been going on for months now. Maybe longer, but I've known about it for months. I saw them together on the day I started at Aunt Helene's store. The day I quit."

I felt as if something inside me were being slowly, carefully torn open. "Is it somebody we know?" I asked quietly.

"No, thank God." She turned to me. Her eyes were dry and clear. "He doesn't know that I know. But I've decided to tell him tonight. Finally. That's why I'm saying this to you now. To warn you that things might be . . . strange for a while."

"Strange how?"

She crossed her arms in front of her, squeezing both elbows. "I can't imagine things will be the same after I tell him I know. Things will change. I have no idea what's going to happen." She heaved a deep, shaky breath. "It's exciting. A little."

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Something was happening on the other side of the fence. My mother's finger went up. "Listen!" she said breathlessly.

I heard a low rumbling from someplace close by. It didn't seem possible that such a noise could come from an animal. The sound seemed to hack painfully, like a saw against tough wood, but it grew in volume until it turned suddenly, astonishingly, into a full-lunged roar. The deep bellowing of it seemed to echo off the tree branches above us and fill the space of the car.

"I'm not sure if it's the male or the female," my mother shouted then, smiling in spite of herself. "God, Cliff, isn't it glorious?"

I put my hand out to brace myself against the dashboard. "Are you going to get a divorce?"

"Just listen," she whispered. She put her hand to her throat and stared straight up at the roof of the car. For the first time in months, she seemed happy to be still, to be motionless. The fear was sizzling in my own gut, but my mother seemed totally content just to sit there, listening, while the light drained away from the hills and the first stars appeared—one by one—like wobbly hatchlings in the sky above our heads.

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MARY WINIFRED HOOD

My Piano

The piano was gone
from the living room where it
once stood, an old upright
approaching one hundred, made of mahogany
with ivory keys. It had never been tuned
in my lifetime.
I sat many years before its dark
face lit by a crystal lamp,
the only thing left in the house which belonged
to me solely, deeply to me. On top
the old Baptist hymnal and broken metronome,
a fragile wooden angel pulling a baby
in a wagon, and an ivory elephant from Chinatown,
San Francisco. Come Christmastime
I'd decorate the top of it with the manger
my father made, greenery from the yard,
and tall, red candles. I, the lone keeper of family
traditions, Granny spurring me on
but not enough, and Mom
letting it all go to hell. She gave me
the measly two hundred bucks in pale twenties,
thin as tissue, what she'd gotten for it. (A family
across town bought it. You'd have liked them. They
had a little girl.) Without a word to me,
miles away, she let them remove my heart
from the house and load it on their rented truck,
so when I got there, back home, the ugly
Empire sofa sat in its place, squat,
its scratchy blue wool covered with a white
seersucker bedspread just like all the Queen Anne
chairs. She was worried somebody's sweaty legs or

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greasy hair would leave a stain.
I have moved on, have left home like she never did,
except briefly, off to college, then back again.
Have I betrayed her by moving North and loving
a man finally? Have I left her alone? For years
it was coming, the slow discarding of my favorite things.
I think of how my fingers grew to fill the keys
and the music I made seemed to lift the ranch
house off the dry, weedy ground, to rattle
the chainlink fences and set the dogs howling.
I was not in Pine Valley, in a plain brick house
on the golf course of a country club I didn't belong to.
The piano fed my hungry spirit, let me imagine a life
outside my small body and small town. And when
I left home for high school, then college, the worn keys
meant home to me more than crossing the bridge
over the Cape Fear, murky-dark river sparkling with
blurs of stars. When it was gone, I knew
I didn't have a home in my mother's house anymore.
Her eyes like bright empty water, she couldn't
tell me why. In the shuttered dark I used to
turn out the light, before she got home from work
and my brother from the day-care center. I'd put away
my sheets of music, close my eyes, and let my hands
find notes, feeling for the soft, glowing spaces
between molecules. I conjured the ghosts that lived between
the keys; they swirled around me in a dance of veils,
my bare feet numbed by the cold brass pedals.
That little girl way across town with my wooden heart
in her house, can she hear it beating?

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Two Octopuses

Two creatures at the bottom
of the sea, each in its lair,
one in an ancient amphora
of a Roman shipwreck,
the other wedged between
slabs of rock. Broken bottles,
crab shells, a lost earring,
and a sandal are scattered
at its hidden doorway.
A piece of mirror glitters
before this house of trinkets.
Has he seen the other?
The golden eyes peering
out of a dark jar.
Has she seen the other,
drifting above or busying
himself about his house,
moving stones?
Her suction disks glow
like many moons in the deep.
Their light seeps
into his skin, flushes
it red. One night as
she's sleeping, a tentacle
brushes her head, the tip
curls around one of her
own. She rises out of
her vessel like a genie
to meet him, a girl in her
nightgown, ghostly, willing.
His beak flashes, shiny, coal black.
He caresses her, cleans his hundreds
of disks, watching her great eyes,
bright as baubles. She doesn't reject him.
He slips his spatula tip underneath
her mantle, feels the flutter of speckled flesh.
For hours they sit, fish swimming by,

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head to turbaned head like soothsayers,
craniums lighting up like crystal balls
till it's silver-blue above.
Morning's come, filtering through
veils of water.
The pulsing of his arm filling
her for the first time with the pearls
his body made, brighter than any
jewels she could bring back home.
For months she dreams of eggs
till she dies, each dream
cracking open with a tulip shaped child.

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ROBIN S. CHAPMAN

The Way In

Let out late at the trailhead to hike with older kids—
My mom driving me across town in another search for
friends—
We thought they could only be a short way ahead,
They'd have waited a while before they set out;
Whoever they were, I set a pace to catch up.

The road led down through the fields and woods—
Which path—and I chose, and the bushes rustled,
Gravel scuffed under foot. I was hurrying now,
And fall was coming on brown and red among the grasses.
I don't remember calling out, or hearing the birds
That must have spoken; just the listening for what might be
Voices.
Again the road divided
And I chose, going among trees—on the right a sycamore
Spoke its sighing name, on the left a white pine towered.
I was lost, and crying now, going on or going back
My only choice of directions. I hurried on for the springs

That had been our destination, though where they were
I had no idea, and my pockets empty of maps—
Taking a journey I did not want under the sun
That crossed overhead—a compass I could not read yet.

I never found the children ahead, or the springs—
But there were people I met on the way who told me the
time.
It was time to go back; and I did, knowing no other way,
And saw how the hills ran at right angles to sun,
How shadows fell and the way led up past the sycamore,

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Smooth in its skin, and the white pine waving.

And there were the grasses again, dustier; the familiar
patches
Of brush; and under the yellow leaves at the side of the
road
I picked wild grapes, spit out the skins; found
The small bones littering a red slash of clay where a fox
Made its den.

I walked slowly, watching now, knowing there'd be,
At the top of the hill, my mother, in a black car waiting.

LUCILLE DAY

Bomb Threat

You have eight minutes
to leave
before the building vaporizes.
Do not turn off your computer.
Do not turn off lights.
Do not lock your door.

Who needs eight minutes?

I was out in three
and halfway up the canyon
before the first thought
crossed my mind
of what I'd left
behind: photos of my daughters,

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an Ansel Adams print
(*Moon and Half Dome*),
Patrick Coffaro's red desert,
pyramids silhouetted
against a purple sky,
gifts from visiting teachers
(a small apple juice bottle
lined with silver, a shell bird
decked with artificial flowers
from Puerto Rico),
not to mention all the work
I've done this year.

Who cares?

Eucalyptus and oak hang low
over the roadway.
Two seagulls circle,
then disappear
in the blue sky, marred
by a shimmering haze,
and all the alveoli bunched
like grapes at the tips
of branching airways
in my lungs
inflate with each sweet breath
of the luminous air.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Bearing Witness

"ARTISTS SHOULDN'T TRY TO IMPROVE OR CONVERT," the German painter Otto Dix wrote near the end of his life in 1958. "They're far too insignificant for that. They must only bear witness."

This mission of "bearing witness," though, is not such a small matter—certainly it wasn't for Dix himself, a man who lived close to the front line of many of this century's most agonizing political traumas. In the final analysis, it was for him, as it has to be for any serious artist, a high and painful calling, and the stirring Otto Dix retrospective in Europe this year—on view at the Tate Gallery in London last spring, in Stuttgart this fall, and in Berlin this coming winter—gave a clear picture of the kind of work that can result from a desire to confront one's time and test one's sense of autobiographical truth. The limitations that attend on a preoccupation with subject matter over new forms and techniques were evident, too; no one is going to be persuaded by this show that Dix is a master of the caliber of Max Beckmann or the legendary giants of the School of Paris. (The curators and catalogue writers do yeoman's work to convince us that their subject is one of the greatest painters of the twentieth century, but the contention did not hold up too well at the Tate in the presence of many of these pictures, especially the late ones.[1]) But, then, Dix had little interest in his renowned contemporaries or in such comparisons, and we do best to focus on his very real accomplishments and the issues his art raises, not making too much of his decline. We judge Brecht by *Galileo* or Strindberg by *Miss Julie*, not by the more numerous failures they produced.

Educated in Dresden, an important art center at the turn of the century, Dix was in his youth an admirer of the painters of the Northern Renaissance, and these influences are obvious in many of the first pictures, grounded as they are in the sound draftsmanship and compositional principles of Dürer, Cranach, and Hans Baldung. Dix was impervious to the siren call of abstraction, to the lure of color over line, to what he saw as the dead-end of Impressionism. There would seem to be shades of his Nietzsche worship in the early

[1] OTTO DIX, 1891–1969. Tate Gallery Publications. $30.00. The catalogue is, in fact, a quite readable and interesting one, with separate essays on twentieth century German history, Dix's relation to Nietzsche, and the reception of Dix's work throughout the course of his career. The commentary on the individual pictures is similarly lively and informative.

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"vanitas" oil *Growth and Decay* (1911), with its unflinching acceptance of death as a part of life. There is a downright obsession with old-fashioned techniques in the thin glazes and compositional style of *Self-Portrait with Hiker's Hat* (1912). In this context, a bracing, somber oil on cardboard like *Sunrise* of the following year indicates an unexpected openness to the Expressionist fervor of the times: Dix's crows, clouds, and mounds of snow rise off the canvas with a uniformly thick, Van Gogh-style application of paint. But, in all, the feeling one has about this artist pre-World War I is of a serious talent belligerently at odds with his era—a truly weird character, this man who was only twenty-two the summer of Sarajevo. His much-reproduced *Self-Portrait with Carnation* (1912), owned by the Detroit Institute of Arts, shows an intense figure who could well be a member of a medieval guild. The circa-1500 garb and haircut he has given himself work emphatically toward this appealing, but strange and anachronistic effect.

How Otto Dix would have developed from these oddball beginnings, acting like the ghost of Holbein in Wilhelmine Germany, then flailing about as an Expressionist, would have been hard to guess if we didn't already know the story. That saga from the trenches of the Western Front through the hysteria of the Weimar Republic, the darkness of Hitler's rise, and a second defeat in war and the partition of his country is what in effect made Dix the important artist he is. World War I transformed him into a witness—a witness, a cynic, and a wit—who would never cease reflecting on what it meant to be a German in the modern age.

At the Tate the spectator bottleneck tended, on my visits, to be in the area of the war etchings, done in 1924. The gatherings of quiet crowds around these images was due not only to their smaller size and the need to see them at close range, but to their intensity and graphic skill, to the pure blend of indignation and artistry that such terrifying pictures represent. A nun with her legs forced apart by a burly soldier, a worm-filled skull, a gas attack, a decaying corpse still in its helmet with rifle in hand, urban ruins and muddy dug-outs: whatever aspect of the madness Dix chose to portray, he gave it the right—that is, impressive and revolting—form. But this isn't all of it, a simple and predictable refusal to forget the violence of 1914–1918, and it isn't quaint realism. What makes this painter of special interest to us today is the fact that he seems never to have gotten over the parallel experience of war that so few painters and writers before midcentury treated with any honesty, namely the revelation of male sexual degradation that armed conflict always brings to the fore, and he knew better than most of his peers how to evoke a pungent sense of eroticism become corrupt, of the body as an expression of our lowest self.

War means maiming and killing, but it also means rape in its various guises and the commodification of sex in the booming

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business of the brothel. In the fierce way they are drawn and in the gauche color tones he has selected, Dix's prostitutes are a horror-show no less ghoulish than his soldiers with their faces blown off. He simply could not get these women out of his mind and, like Zola (and unlike Maupassant), could see nothing droll or chummy about their condition. *The Salon* of 1921 is a stylized rendering of ferocious moral ugliness—yet, on the surface, all it is is a painting of four women of varying ages, one quite old, in their see-through slips awaiting their customers. But how unendurable the pinched face of that older woman is, and how soon (Dix makes us feel) the younger women will come to that pathetic state. *Sex Murder* (1922) is a watercolor to make Egon Schiele's vaginally bleeding forms look arty and elegant. *Me in Brussels* (the artist shows himself in uniform watching a prostitute parade her bare buttocks), *Dream of the Female Sadist*, *Tropical Night*, and *Elderly Couple* are all of the same period, all done in that "genteel" medium of watercolor, and all agressive in their testimony about sex-as-power and lust-as-death.

Even in his portraits of the mid and late twenties, the work which made Dix a famous man, the undercurrent of unhealthiness persists, only now this quality gains from an air of cosmopolitanism, from the mythology of Berlin before the fall. *Anita Berber* (1925) is a study of the lesbian dancer in shades of blood red, rust, and maroon. *Sylvia Von Harden* (1926) depicts that lanky, monocled journalist in a similarly stilted context—all hands, ennui, and a reddish-pink aura. *Alfred Flechtheim* is a model of the predatory art dealer, and *Ivar Von Lucken* (both 1926)—my favorite painting in the whole exhibition, a great work largely unknown outside Germany—is a classic visual expression, without being in the least corny, of the alienation of an impoverished poet and a gentle soul. Following the triumph of the Nazis, this exuberant phase of Dix's career ended, and he was forced to hold fire, turning to the safer genre of landscape and the murky territory of allegory. Ultimately he suffered his share of persecution and was included in the Nazi "Degenerate Art" display in 1937 (see *The Hudson Review*, Vol. XLIV, No. 4, Winter 1992, pp. 623–626).

There is a wild unevenness to Dix's art, to be sure. Seen in such numbers at the Tate, this body of work forces us to acknowledge that the paintings of Dix's last four decades go downhill pretty fast. Nothing he did in the aftermath of World War II, in his effort to evoke the devastation of postwar Germany, is particularly skillful, and the 1967 portrait of Max Frisch is almost a parody of the artist's strengths. Yet there was always an element of kitsch, an anti-gentility, even a tackiness, in Otto Dix (especially in the images of sex and prostitution or the triptych *Metropolis*) and that, no doubt, is the necessary price of such a vision. So we accept it. The pictures that bear witness faithfully, imaginatively, and angrily are worth the cost.

Another aspect of this question of using art to dramatize suffering

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was presented last summer in the Kathe Kollwitz exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. This was an exquisite presentation in every way: each picture a gem, the installation flawless—and no acousti-guides or annoying posters! What we were able to do, spared any distractions, was simply appreciate the growth of one of the best graphic artists of our time and, not so simply, to ponder the awkward philosophical question that seems to come with this territory. The dilemma here, such as it is, is that in Kollwitz's world we are far removed from Dix's powerful gaucherie, in much more capable artistic hands, yet this aesthetic judgment makes a "proper" reaction to her art all the harder. In other words, if her themes are the brutality of war, the intolerable slavery of the working class, and the anguish of loss, how are we to feel what Kollwitz wants us to when we are really so absorbed by the beauty of her ink washes, the deftness of her line, her perfect sense of shape and light?

It was interesting to read in the catalogue that Kollwitz herself was aware of this potential problem and brooded on the implications of her calling in relation to her social conscience. A devotee of the printmaking of the late nineteenth-century master Max Klinger, she had no difficulty in renouncing the more traditional paths that led to oil painting for what she (and Klinger) saw as the greater expressive freedom of graphic art, and from her earliest days she was interested in reaching a larger public than painting allowed for and effecting changes in social awareness. Kollwitz had a phenomenal gift for drawing, as even the first, strong, well-modeled self-portraits in this show attest, and it makes sense that two of her earliest projects are cycles of works—full visual narratives, never completed—for Emile Zola's *Germinal* and Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, a novel and a play that are among the most angry and explicitly political works of the nineteenth century. Yet, precisely because she was so good, she felt that she had to labor to prevent the kind of reaction she didn't want. Twice the catalogue essay of Elizabeth Prelinger addresses this fascinating dilemma: "By deliberately seeking a gritty and corroded effect on the surface of the plates [Kollwitz] shaped the viewer's apprehension of the scene, removing the possibility of aestheticizing the event and forcing the beholder into the hovels of the destitute." Later, commenting on how seldom Kollwitz used color in her work, Prelinger observes, ". . . these sheets [in color] constitute a poignant reminder of her strong and seldom indulged inclination toward pure aestheticism."[2]

Yet, in truth, whatever Kollwitz's wishes, the whole business is an aesthetic feast. *Uprising* (1899) depicts a crowd of peasants in wild revolt, an allegory of rebellion and defeat, but what holds our

[2] KATHE KOLLWITZ. Essays by Elizabeth Prelinger, Alessandra Comini, and Hildegard Bachert. National Gallery of Art and Yale University Press. $45.00. The quotations are from pages 25 and 49, respectively.

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attention—what we necessarily reflect on longest—is not the condition of the poor so much as the stringy manner in which the workers are drawn, the clever use of the open space at the top of the drawing for the sky that allows the flags and sickles to stand out all the more, or the artist's ability to convey a believable and tense sense of motion. *Woman with Dead Child* (1903) is memorable as a sculptural piece of drawing; *End* (1897), showing bodies being carried in to a worker's shack under the eyes of the grieving family, is of interest for the fullness of the composition; the many self-portraits also cause us to reflect on the amazing level of graphic skill they evince, more than the tragedy the eyes suggest.

None of these remarks is meant as a criticism of Kathe Kollwitz's talent—rather, as a statement about a bind that can't be wished away. We don't have to agree with W.H. Auden's complete dismissal of the power of art with political aspirations ("art changes nothing"), but there is no denying—especially in the cloistered rooms of the National Gallery, insulated from any thought of Washington's nearby homeless citizens or drug-infested slums—that all art of a certain style and caliber aestheticizes experience, removes it to another realm. In that sense, perhaps the crudeness of Dix's paintings serves as a more faithful chronicle or evocation than Kollwitz's. And the fact that Kollwitz seems more talented merely makes the predicament that sensitive viewers are placed in all the more troubling and enticing.

Or, there is yet another way to look at this issue. It seems to me that it is when Kollwitz is being most specific, wanting us to think about the plight of the weavers of the world or the need for political action, that the dichotomy between social intention and aesthetic response most quickly breaks down. But when she is most general, evoking a mood of sorrow or a spirit of loneliness or quiet anguish, that is where she is most successful on her own terms—in the merger of subject matter and pure, empowering skill. For this dignified, much-abused woman, who lost a son at twenty-one in the First World War and a grandson at twenty-one in Hitler's carnage, who was herself hounded by the Nazis, knew as much as anyone about the pain of life. What distinguishes her from others, though, is her desire to record that pain, a process that necessarily transforms it.

In a less exhausting vein: two summer shows of particularly strong quality, different as they were, nicely illustrated the wisdom of the narrow focus—something our museums, large and small, tended to forget in the eighties, the proverbial decade of excess.

At the Corcoran Gallery, a show devoted exclusively to Max Weber's Cubist period gave me an entirely new perspective on the strengths of that Stieglitz-circle modernist, and at the Cape Ann Historical Museum in Gloucester, Massachusetts, an exhibition featuring John Sloan, Stuart Davis, and their friends took a fresh approach to these crucial figures in American art history. The 75

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paintings, watercolors, gouaches, and drawings at the Weber exhibition (all from 1910–1920) show him as the American with the greatest interest in—and, more significantly, the surest grasp of—Cubism of anyone in his generation. And what a distinction that is! (Years ago the art historian Milton Brown coined the term "Cubist Realism" for the homegrown version of this style: too few Americans were willing or able to go all the way, in the slicing of planes and rearrangement of forms, to pursue Cubism's goal of a "mind's eye" view of reality.) The works at the Corcoran, which have already made the rounds to Atlanta and Houston and are now headed to Buffalo, Brooklyn, and Los Angeles, are, almost without exception, intriguing constructions and intelligent treatments of their subjects. The exceptional feature of Weber's use of the techniques evolved by Picasso, Braque, and Gris is its application to fast-paced urban life, its proof that what worked for still life was just as effective in the treatment of the sensory overload of the modern city. *Rush Hour, New York* (1915) with its wedges and its circular forms conveys both an idea of manic movement and the sharp angularity of the buildings that surround the "movers." *New York* of 1913 seems to be a less oppressive veiw of the city in that the colors used are of a greater, more buoyant range, but the sense of frenzy and excitement, of multiple experience and a reality that can't be simplified and contained, is just as plausible. The true culmination of Max Weber's study of Cubism, the Whitney Museum's wondrous *Chinese Restaurant* (1915), is a well-known painting, a happy melange of waiter, floor tile, table cloth, wall, and patron. The great thing at the Corcoran was to see all of the steps, so few of them incomplete or half-hearted, that led up to it.

The Gloucester show, on the other hand, dealt less with questions of style than of place, or spirit. During the summers of 1914–1918 John Sloan, best known at the time for his "City Life" etchings and his somewhat darkly painted urban vignettes, rented a small red cottage near the beach on Cape Ann. He invited numerous friends, like Stuart Davis and his mother and Alice and Charles Winter, to join him and his wife in getting out of New York to enjoy the sun and the chance to paint the landscape. Curator Britt Crews's idea was to bring together twenty-five or so works by the various occupants of the cottage during those summers. The result was a small, informative, effectively installed exhibition that came with plenty of background information on the walls in the form of photographs, news clippings about the artists from area papers, and to-the-point wall plaques.

Some of the art on view at the Cape Ann Historical Museum was the work of people largely unknown today, and there is, to judge from their landscapes and portraits there, no good reason anyone should know Paul Cornoyer or Charles Allan Winter. Alice Beach Winter's pictures show more skill and vivacity (the Winters were prominent New York Socialists, hence their connection to Sloan and Davis in their time on the radical magazine *The Masses*), and Stuart Davis'

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mother turns out to be a talented sculptor. Randall Davey's portrait of a Portuguese grandmother is a strong example of traditional portraiture. The real significance of the exhibition, of course, has to do with Sloan and Davis: two men, one at age forty-three the summer of 1914 and the other at age thirty, moving down their different paths in response to the New England landscape that so exhilarated them. For Davis, this was an opportunity to begin in a serious way the process of abstracting forms from visible reality; for Sloan, it was a time to leave behind the darker palette and urban motifs that had occupied him for so many years. That paintings as different as Davis' Cubist *Gloucester Street* and Sloan's Fauve-inspired *Glare on the Bay* were worked on in the same cottage at the same time is a sort of metaphor itself—inspired in their separate ways by the Armory Show (the one artist by changes in structure, the other by a new feeling for rich color), two men go their own way, confidently and energetically. We were able to watch in this pleasing show Stuart Davis become a Cubist and John Sloan become a creator of bright, lush landscapes, major changes in the professional lives of both men. Literally, the house of painting has many windows—and no better place than Gloucester in the summer to acknowledge this vital truth.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Musicals Revived

Miss Saigon is not a musical comedy. Neither are *Les Misérables*, *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, nor most of the other Anglo-American atrocities perpetrated on the Broadway stage in the last decade. These productions are *operettas*, a European form with exotic, usually historical settings, sentimental plots, and a lush, operatic style of music that is closer to Puccini than to Porter (though Puccini would probably gag if he had to listen to it). As with opera, lyrics and dialogue are relatively unimportant; an opera or operetta can please an audience that does not know a word of the language it is written in. (Many opera companies now have translated supertitles running above the stage, so that you can find out how little you have been missing all these years.)

By contrast, musical comedies are distinctly American, with contemporary American urban characters and settings, satirical plots, syncopated music, snappy dialogue, and clever lyrics. Singing is full-voiced, yet crisply verbal; singers of opera and operetta tend to function on vowels alone, which is not too bad in a Romance language like Italian but reduces English to mush, while musical comedy singers use vowels as a bridge between conspicuously pronounced consonants. Even when a full chorus is singing, the words seem engraved in bronze.

Musical comedy singers are therefore very concerned with conveying the precise meaning of the lyrics, including subtle allusions and word play. Singers of opera and operetta gush with generalized emotion, at times with great intensity, but they do not communicate dramatic poetry. In today's Broadway operettas, there are thus no lyrics with the shrewd import of Lorenz Hart's "Falling in Love with Love," the lyrical beauty of Ira Gershwin's "My Ship," or the sophisticated word play of almost any Cole Porter song.

Two issues ago in *The Hudson Review* (Vol. XLV, No. 1, Spring 1992), I bemoaned the apparent demise of the American musical comedy, epitomized by the flop of the hapless *Nick and Nora*. As if rising to a challenge, half a dozen musicals opened on Broadway in the spring, including *Guys and Dolls*, *Jelly's Last Jam*, *Crazy for You*, *Five Guys Named Moe*, and *Most Happy Fella*. (OK, so the last is really more operetta than musical comedy, and the difference between the two is not always so distinct as I have made out. Sue me, sue me, what can you do me?)

Guys and Dolls is the archetypal American musical comedy. Set in New York in 1950, it celebrates the city's sounds and rhythms, its

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energy and exuberance. The postwar period was perhaps the last time that the city had confidence in itself, that the name "New York" was not synonymous with "problems." There are sex, drinking, fighting, and gambling in *Guys and Dolls*, but even the Salvation Army characters do not seem all that concerned; they are fighting sin, but are not living in terror of it.

The book for the musical is attributed to Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows, but the director of the original production, George S. Kaufman, had a notable hand in it. Kaufman was a great collaborator and play doctor; he wrote only one play on his own, but collaborated officially on forty (more than half of them hits), and unofficially on many more. His work is characterized by brisk pace, pungent satire, and clever wisecracks. There is a moment in *Guys and Dolls* that is obviously pure Kaufman: when Adelaide comes from her bridal shower with her gifts strung around her neck, a bunch of pots and pans, a drunk walks by and says scornfully, "What vulgar jewelry!" Also typically Kaufmanesque is the lack of sentimentality in the script; there is no real love scene in it, and only two kisses. Sky steals a kiss from Sarah and gets his face slapped; she kisses him briefly when she gets drunk in Havana. In the subplot, Nathan Detroit and Adelaide, who have been engaged fourteen years, never even embrace.

The plot for *Guys and Dolls* is based on a Damon Runyon story, "The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown." It is very slight; Sky Masterson, a big-time gambler, falls for a Salvation Army worker. He goes to her mission, gets the brush-off, then gets the idea of betting against crap players for their souls. He bets Brandy Bottle Bates several times; if Sky wins, Brandy Bottle has to attend Sarah's mission for six months and swear off gambling. Sky gets cleaned out. Sarah comes along, bets Sky for *his* soul, and wins. In the last paragraph, Sky is beating a big bass drum at the mission, and Sarah has become Mrs. Sky. It is all written in Runyon's ersatz New Yorkese, a romantic stylization of the way gamblers in his day talked, in long, slangy clauses loosely spliced together. ("There are only four of these mission workers, and two of them are old guys, and one is an old doll, while the other is a young doll who is tootling on a cornet.") It sounds quaint and sanitized today, which is one reason no one reads Runyon anymore. Another is that beneath this phony exterior, like the marshmallow center of a chocolate candy, the stories themselves are often soft and sickeningly sweet. The slang and the gambling in "The Idyll" cannot disguise the fact that it is about a wastrel redeemed by the love of a Pure Woman.

In *Guys and Dolls*, Swerling, Burrows, and Kaufman flesh out the story in impressive ways. Characters from other Runyon stories, including Harry the Horse and Nicely-Nicely Johnson, add color. The character of Nathan Detroit, mentioned only briefly by Runyon as operating the crap games, becomes a major figure. The salient detail that he makes his money by running crap games, taking money off the top, rather than by gambling himself, carries over into his personal

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life, where a similar lack of commitment has left him engaged to a showgirl, Miss Adelaide, for fourteen years. Furthermore, Sarah, the Salvation Army worker, is now satirized; beneath her pious exterior lies a healthy sensuality. The play begins with Nathan betting that Sky cannot get Sarah to go to Havana with him; she not only goes, but gets drunk, sings, dances, and enjoys herself hugely. (She never loses her basic naïveté, however, and Sky, gentleman that he is, does not take advantage of her condition.)

Finally, Sky now actually *wins* the crap game for the gamblers' souls, delivering a dozen sinners to Sarah's mission. This not only provides the justification for the glorious mock-revival song, "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," but also carries through the theme of risking and winning: The Salvation Army was about to close down Sarah's mission for lack of business; Sarah begs General Cartwright to risk keeping it open, and wins. Adelaide, in her song, "Marry the Man Today," decides that she will risk taking Nathan as he is, and try to change him later. Sky risks everything on a roll of the dice to get Sarah, and ultimately wins her. The play can be seen as an allegory on American risk capitalism, but it also has religious connotations, since Christianity, represented here by the Salvation Army, also requires you to risk everything to be saved, believing first and getting your reward later. Finally, marriage is always a risk, but even more as seen here traditionally; you must commit yourself first, and get sexual satisfaction after. With its interwoven themes of gambling, religious fundamentalism, and sexual puritanism, *Guys and Dolls* is vastly richer than the Damon Runyon story, and more insightfully American.

Equally rich is Frank Loesser's fabulous score. So many of its songs have become standards that when listening to it you feel like the person who was surprised to find a Shakespeare play so full of quotations. The ballads "I'll Know," "If I Were a Bell," and "I've Never Been in Love Before" are lovely; the novelty songs "A Bushel and a Peck," "Take Back Your Mink," and "Adelaide's Lament" are hilarious (the last is the only popular song in history with lyrics from a medical text, complete with footnotes!); the production numbers "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" and "Guys and Dolls" make you want to cheer and shout. There are musical jokes, polyphony, intricate rhythms ("Fugue for Tin Horns," "Sue Me"), and strong influences from 1940s bebop and jazz ("My Time of Day," "Luck Be a Lady"). The score seems like the culmination of American popular music of its time.

Alas, the production of *Guys and Dolls* that opened on Broadway in April, despite rave notices and a six-month advance sale, was merely adequate. In recent years I have seen better in Minneapolis, Ontario, and even London. Tony Walton's settings and William Ivey Long's costumes were in ugly, feverish colors. (For some reason, too, "A Bushel and a Peck," meant to be costumed in farm outfits, was done as a Ziegfeld-style production number, with huge feathered costumes, which was wrong both for the style of the song and the period of the

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play.) Jerry Zaks's directing mostly involved having performers march to the front and center of a largely bare stage. Nathan Lane and Faith Prince played Nathan and Adelaide as cartoonish figures, making me recall Jerry Stiller and Barbara Sharma in the roles in Minneapolis, who brought depth to the roles and their relationship, without losing any of the humor. Josie de Guzman as Sarah had a throaty voice; only Peter Gallagher as Sky, among the four principals, had sufficient charm and ability for his role, singing the difficult songs with easy mastery, while radiating force and nonchalant elegance. Also, Christopher Chadman's choreography was beautifully conceived and executed, while the orchestra, under Edward Strauss, sounded glorious.

Guys and Dolls will be running long after this review appears, and is well worth seeing. A better buy, however, for my money (sixty-five dollars!), was the production of *Crazy for You*, which opened in late February. It is a version of the 1930 Gershwin musical, *Girl Crazy*, with a new book by Ken Ludwig, and some added Gershwin songs. Ludwig's book is just as silly as the original, involving the same central device as in his hit farce, *Lend Me a Tenor*: a young woman falls in love with her ardent suitor only when he is in disguise. It is certainly a funny idea, but good heavens, Mr. Ludwig, don't you have any others?

The songs added from other Gershwin shows include some recently found in a warehouse in New Jersey, where they might as well have stayed. While I idolize George and Ira Gershwin even more than most, I do not think every song they wrote was a masterpiece. They probably did not think so either, which is no doubt the reason the songs were lost; good songs made money, which is something the brothers respected. They would not have forgotten material that represented a potential profit.

Nevertheless, *Crazy for You* still contains lots of great Gershwin, including "K-r-azy for You," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "Embraceable You," "I Got Rhythm," "They Can't Take That Away from Me," and "Nice Work If You Can Get It." The two leads, Harry Groener and Jodi Benson, were terrific, as were the supporting cast and the orchestra. I found the settings, by Robin Wagner, too splendiferous, with massive structures sliding in and out and up and down for splashy effects, so that at the end an entire Western town turned into an Art Deco wedding cake. I also objected to turning "Embraceable You" into a novelty song. Otherwise, *Crazy for You* had me crazy for it.

Five Guys Named Moe is a jolly piece, little more than a revue, using the music of Louis Jordan, the bandleader of the forties and fifties whose songs anticipated rock-and-roll. There is a plot, of sorts, about five black guys named Moe who appear to help a sixth guy reunite with his girlfriend. Jordan's songs, like "Look Out, Sister," "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?" or "Choo, Choo, Ch'Boogie," are all novelty numbers, thus lacking in variety for a full show; he was hardly a great composer or musician. I left at intermission, not in despair, but only with the feeling that a single act, though enjoyable, was enough.

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Jelly's Last Jam is a vehicle for Gregory Hines, based on the life and music of Jelly Roll Morton. Since Morton *was* a great musician, the project held promise. The problem, however, is that Hines is primarily a dancer (though he sings and plays piano as well) and Morton was not. This could be confusing, as when Hines as the young Jelly showed up to demonstrate his piano-playing ability by breaking into a fabulous dance routine. Oh well, the 1930s musical *I'd Rather Be Right* had FDR tap dancing. Maybe Hines will dance roles as Fats Waller or Duke Ellington or—who knows?—Martin Luther King, Jr.

A more serious problem was the music. There was surprisingly little jazz, the creators of the show seeming to prefer blues, gospel, and ragtime. The few Chicago jazz numbers were given watered-down arrangements by Luther Henderson, and I feared there would be no New Orleans jazz at all (Morton, born Ferdinand Le Menthe, was a Creole from that city), but finally we got a terrific production number at the end in the style of a New Orleans jazz funeral. Hines, the best song-and-dance man since John Bubbles, is worth seeing in anything, but be prepared here for disappointments, and suspend your disbelief at the door.

Note that all the musicals I have mentioned are revivals, at least of their music. I hope we are in the position that jazz was ten years ago, when it began to regain its popularity. There was considerable interest in the older generation of players, but critics noticed the lack of young blood, which is essential for any vital art form. Then, along came dozens of great young players, led by the fabulous, and apparently inexhaustible, Marsalis siblings. Are there any young Gershwins or Berlins or Porters or Rodgerses out there? The success of the current crop of musicals on Broadway proves that there is an audience for you.

The plays that made Arthur Miller's reputation are not among his best. *All My Sons* is clumsily constructed; like many well-made plays, it seems to have been written backward, with the early scenes lumbering obviously to the final confrontation between father and son. The central tragic event in *Death of a Salesman*—Biff's discovery of his father with a prostitute—is totally fortuitous, and out of character for Willy Loman. His tragic flaw has been established as an obsessive belief in the importance of being well liked, which has nothing to do with promiscuity. Miller's adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* mutilates a great play, while *The Crucible*, except for a magnificent trial scene, is overwritten and talky.

In some of Miller's later plays, however, especially *A View from the Bridge*, *The Price*, and *The American Clock*, the ethical dilemmas equal those of the earlier plays in intensity, while the construction is far more graceful. *The Price*, revived in June by the Roundabout, seems just about perfect. A middle-aged policeman named Victor Franz meets a furniture dealer to try to sell him some furniture that

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belonged to Victor's father. The furniture naturally brings back memories of his life, thus providing justification for exposition. The potential sale also provides justification for a reunion between the cop and his brother, a surgeon whom he has not seen for eighteen years. Both brothers had been good students, but Victor dropped out of school to look after their impoverished father, a wealthy man who fell apart after the Wall Street crash.

Miller sees life as always involving trade-offs; whatever you do, there is always a "price." Victor sacrificed a college education and a potential career to care for his father. His brother Walter went his own way, becoming a successful surgeon by ignoring the plight of his brother and father, but in the process also becoming estranged from them. In the second act, we learn even more; the father actually kept some money stashed away, which is why Walter contemptuously refused to help support him and Victor. Yet Victor, who did not know of the money at the time, when they were literally almost starving, now defends his father for hoarding just enough money to keep some self-esteem. Besides, Walter ended up isolated and even divorced, and has suffered a breakdown, while Victor is happily married and has a fine son. This modern Jacob and Esau story ends with the two brothers forever alienated.

The Price is just the kind of realistic play that the Roundabout does beautifully. John Lee Beatty's dark, atmospheric set piled with furniture was a constant source of fascination. Jane Greenwood's costumes, in a play in which there are many references to clothing, were always precisely telling, as in the contrast between Victor's police uniform and Walter's cashmere overcoat. Hector Elizondo as Victor, Debra Mooney as his wife, and Joe Spano as Walter, were flawless, not only individually but in their relating to one another, in this play about relationships.

As often happens with *The Price*, however, the actor playing the furniture dealer stole the show. Eli Wallach was masterful as the old Jewish fellow, a Dionysian character in the play despite being nearly ninety, whose many marriages and former career as an acrobat contrast him with the two brothers who were forever avoiding risks. Wallach, now seventy-six himself, managed to seem aged yet agile, acting with his whole body, using wonderful wordless reactions and non-verbal sounds to express the character. His delivery and timing were perfection. Wallach is one of that great generation of Method actors who came along in New York in the forties and fifties, then went to Hollywood and did little or no stage work again. Lately, he has been returning to his roots, with wonderful results for all of us.

Donald Margulies' *Sight Unseen* concerns a young Jewish-American artist, Jonathan Waxman, who has become famous for his iconoclastic paintings. The most notorious shows a black man making love to a white woman in a Jewish cemetery that has been desecrated, thus

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managing to sum up most of the racial, sexual, and religious fears and prejudices of the twentieth century on a single canvas. Now, with his father recently dead, he feels that he is at a turning point as an artist, that soon there will be no one whom he wants to shock anymore. He goes to meet a former model and lover at her home in England, where she lives and works with her husband, an archaeologist.

The woman, named Patricia, has kept the painting he did of her, a nude study that he did for his art class in college. This work now inspires him to renewed creation, but at the same time it brings back memories of their unhappy relationship. Stimulated by his rapt attention to her naked body, she made a play for him that led to an affair. To her horror, she came to realize that his interest in her was not love nor even lust, but purely aesthetic. Now, years later, the formerly passionate woman lives in a largely sexless marriage with her shy husband, whose chief occupations involve excavating a Roman latrine and an overlying medieval rubbish dump.

Sight Unseen is thus a reworking of Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, a fact that was largely lost on New York drama critics, who cannot be expected to have read any play written before 1980. But many of Margulies' plays are inspired by literary works, most notably *The Loman Family Picnic*, which takes off from *Death of a Salesman*. (The critics managed to figure that one out.) Both *Sight Unseen* and *When We Dead Awaken* deal with the relationship between an artist and his nude model, recognizing that what might popularly be seen as an erotic situation can actually be as cold and analytical as a medical examination. In both plays, the model is drained of her vitality and left devastated; Ibsen's version actually has her criminally insane. In *Sight Unseen*, the artist is young, and his paintings intentionally shock; in *When We Dead Awaken*, the artist is a sculptor at the end of a long, successful career, and his works, portrait busts that are popularly successful, slyly ridicule their subjects, who are too stupid to realize they are being satirized. In both plays, there is a depiction of art as something disruptive, ruthless, and ultimately unemotional. A work of art is both a stimulus for and a triumph over emotion.

Both plays, though powerful, are sketchy. At times, *When We Dead Awaken* seems like an outline that Ibsen failed to complete. *Sight Unseen* seems more like a finished work, but its minor characters are shallow and its ending inconclusive. Perhaps the shallowness was an impression resulting from weak acting; in the revived Manhattan Theatre Club production that I saw in late spring, Jon De Vries as the archaeologist seemed excessively loud and oafish, while Laura Linney as a German art critic seemed like a reincarnation of a Nazi from a World War II Hollywood movie. But Dennis Boutsikaris was sensitive and intelligent as the artist, while Deborah Hedwall provided a sense of alienation and angst that was wrenching. Both won Obie Awards for their performances, as Margulies did for his play. He is clearly a playwright to watch.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

THROUGHOUT HIS LONG AND SUCCESSFUL COMPOSING CAREER—it has spanned thirty years, and he is just fifty-four years of age—John Corigliano has never been a darling of the critics. He works basically in and around diatonicism and tonality, and like any good eclectic borrows freely from idioms both fashionable and unfashionable. Critical opinion of all schools and no school has found him too facile, too rootless, too ready to adapt to the needs of performers and institutions at the drop of a commission. Much of his music is made to order—concertos for well-known instrumentalists, film scores and *pièces d'occasion* for anniversaries, openings and contests—music that can suffer the stigma of nonportability to other venues. And little of it raises intellectual issues of the kind that ignite critical enthusiasm.

But, through the conjunction of talent, broad experience and a secure berth in the bosom of the American musical establishment—his father was concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic for almost a quarter-century, and the son studied at Columbia and the Manhattan School of Music and now teaches at Juilliard—Corigliano has fashioned a body of music to rival that of any postwar American composer in solid merit. The season just past brought New York two major premieres, both firsts for Corigliano: his opera, *The Ghosts of Versailles*, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera for its centennial 1983–84 season (and thus almost a decade overdue); and his Symphony No. 1, another commission, this one from the Chicago Symphony for its own centennial in 1990, written while he was composer in residence with that orchestra (1987–90) under the auspices of the Meet-the-Composer program.

It should be said at once that both these works have demonstrated a popular appeal that is rare for contemporary American concert music. The recording of the symphony by the Chicago orchestra led by Daniel Barenboim spent several weeks last year as *Billboard* magazine's third-best-selling classical item in the country, jostling Pavarotti and James Galway, and the opera, clamorously received by the audience at its premiere late in December, sold out its remaining six performances—an experience reported to be so heady for the Met's management that it considered shuffling the spring schedule to extend the work's run. The symphony, moreover, solidified its status with a series of honors: the cachet-heavy University of Louisville

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Grawemeyer Award for 1991, and the Grammy awards for best contemporary composition and best orchestral recording.

Neither of these works lacks ambition. Corigliano and librettist William M. Hoffman announce on the title page of *The Ghosts of Versailles* that it is "a grand opera buffa suggested by *La mère coupable* of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais," thus staking a claim to a place in traditions stretching from Gluck and Pergolesi to Puccini and Prokofiev, alongside the Beaumarchais-inspired creations of Mozart and Rossini. But they don't stop at merely invoking the traditions: composer and librettist imitate them, loot them, tease them (one character derides the final act of *The Marriage of Figaro*), hold them up to scrutiny both admiring and deconstructing, intellectualize them, trifle with them (another declares "singers have no minds")—in short, try to wring from them enough artistic juice to nourish their own theatrical offspring.

And a hefty one it is, too: this opera is determined to be large-scale and important. In two acts each lasting an hour and twenty minutes, it has a cast of singing and speaking players numbering 26, plus crowds of extras, a huge orchestra and a stage band. Though it utilizes a unitary set, the staging by Colin Graham is lavish and self-conscious, replete, like the libretto, with references to eighteenth-century history, art and science, and laden with iconic adornment.

The narrative line of *Ghosts*, though not difficult to follow in the theater, nonetheless resists easy summary. Hoffman tells us, in a "production note" in the libretto, that "the basic premise . . . is that a group of ghosts is watching an opera. Because of this structure [*Ghosts*] takes place on three planes of reality: 1) The world of eternity, inhabited by ghosts; 2) The world of the stage, peopled by dramatic characters; 3) The world of history, populated by mortals." The cast includes Beaumarchais himself, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette; Figaro, Susanna, Cherubino and the Count and Countess Almaviva; three characters from *La mère coupable*, the last of the Figaro plays—Léon, Rosina's illegitimate son by Cherubino, Florestine, the Count's illegitimate daughter, and Patrick Honoré Bégearss, an adventurer who has Almaviva's confidence, and the villain of the piece; and half a dozen or so others of lesser importance, ghosts, players and mortals.

The opera begins in the present, at Marie Antoinette's theater in the Petit Trianon in Versailles. The shade of Beaumarchais is in love with that of the Queen, who ceaselessly laments her early death at the hands of the revolutionaries, and he resolves first to entertain her with a new stage creation to be called *A Figaro for Antonia*. When the hijinks of Figaro and the others fail to lift her spirits, the playwright declares he can use his imaginative powers to change the course of history. Though the Queen warns him he jeopardizes his immortal soul, he will employ the agency of theater to save her from the guillotine.

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The scene shifts to Paris in 1793, at the beginning of the Reign of Terror. The Almavivas, old friends of the Queen, who is imprisoned, are living there, and Beaumarchais puts his characters through their paces in a plot to sell a diamond necklace belonging to Marie Antoinette to raise money for her escape to the New World and safety. A series of encounters between the Beaumarchais characters ends in a scene at the Turkish embassy, where Almaviva hopes to offer the necklace to the British ambassador, but Bégearss, secretly in the pay of the Revolution, foils the scheme and Figaro escapes with the diamonds.

As the second act opens, Figaro departs from his creator's script, asserts that the frivolous Queen does not deserve to be rescued and announces his intention of saving the Almavivas from Bégearss and his co-conspirators instead. Beaumarchais himself enters his creative domain to get things back on track. At the Queen's behest, he reprises her trial before the Revolutionary Tribunal, revealing its gross miscarriage of justice and the bloodthirstiness of the mob. Figaro changes his mind. But when Bégearss later shows up at a ball at the Almavivas' palace, unmasks his true allegiance and orders the aristocrats in attendance arrested, Beaumarchais finds that his manipulations have deprived him of his power over his characters. All of them are jailed with the Queen, but Figaro and Beaumarchais escape. Later they gain entry to the prison and engineer the freedom of the Almaviva household. When the playwright tries to make good his promise to the Queen and urges her to join them, she refuses, preferring to suffer her historical fate and remain in the spirit world "for eternity" with Beaumarchais.

Finally, as Hoffman's note explains, "*Ghosts of Versailles* represents a journey from the most fantastic to the most realistic. In the last scene, however, all three planes are juxtaposed: the historical Marie Antoinette is executed in the Place de la Révolution, the cast of *A Figaro for Antonia* makes [its] escape to London in a balloon, and the ghosts of the Queen and Beaumarchais walk off together into the land of eternal delight—the gardens of Aguas Frescas [the Almavivas' palace in Seville, scene of the final act of *Nozze di Figaro*]."

It will come as little surprise that this elaborate structure rests on some rather feeble supports. Questions pop up at every turn. Why is Beaumarchais's soul at risk when he proposes to alter history to save the Queen? Asserted but not justified, it sticks out as a transparent plot device. What confers on Figaro the power to go his own way in the second act? Why do the Queen and Beaumarchais go to the Almavivas' estate at the end? It may have been part of the creators' strategy to distract the audience from such troubling thoughts during the evening's progress, for woven into this conceptually dense fabric are enough *coups de théâtre* for several nights on the town. There are solo set pieces, ensemble scenes, crowd scenes, farcical episodes, the "opera-within-an-opera," the obligatory "drag" act, Keystone-cop-

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style chases, passages in French, Turkish and Church Latin, verbatim transcription of the Queen's trial, references to "Arrigo Boito's epic poem *Il Re Orso*," to the historical Affair of the Diamond Necklace that irrevocably damaged Marie Antoinette's reputation in France, to the craze for things Turkish that swept late-eighteenth-century stagecraft—culminating here in a protracted comic, but not very funny, star turn for Marilyn Horne, to clockmaking (Beaumarchais's profession before taking up playwriting) and the first manned ascent in a hot-air balloon, and so on. But distractions can't do the job. Pitted against such synthetic enchantments, the rational faculty has an easy time keeping its guard up.

Perhaps inevitably, Corigliano's music is a perfect match for all this, a sumptuous salad bar of forms, styles and sonic gestures, its only unifying trait its self-consciousness. In passages for the "real" characters—the Queen's opening aria, Beaumarchais's second-act plea to her, and the prison-scene quintet, for example—the composer writes in a contemporary idiom like that of his symphony. Vocal lines move within a narrow compass, carefully tied to declamatory needs, supported by orchestral pedal points or repeated instrumental figuration, and punctuated by percussive outbursts. (There are a fair number of spoken lines in these sections, too.) Harmony is secondary for the most part, nonstructural and intermittent. In passages for the stage characters—Figaro's patter song, Bégearss's Aria of the Worm, the Cherubino-Rosina duet and the Almavivas' quartet—Corigliano writes artful ersatz Mozart and Rossini filtered through a contemporary lens, spiked with twentieth-century acerbity and knowingness.

For the rest, there are overt if fleeting allusions to *Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, the *Barber of Seville* and *L'Italiana in Algeri* in an orchestral skein that alternates static lyrical passages with exploitation of instrumental extremes. Much of this ably fills the bill, and some of the derivative Mozart and Rossini shows the composer's facility for melody writing. Compared with the often commonplace language of Hoffman's libretto, the music has sophistication and skill. But a crucial element is lacking: call it theatrical conviction.

Nostalgia was the word most often invoked, in conversation and in print, in connection with *The Ghosts of Versailles*. And nostalgic it certainly is, in a variety of easily spotted ways. There is the frank nostalgia evoked by the libretto's words, in the duet for Rosina and Susanna ("O time, O time, O thieving time, / Give me back my stolen years") and the Almavivas' amorous quartet ("Remember the fragrance of mushrooms in the air?" / "I remember there were raindrops in your hair."). Nostalgia too might describe the work's manifest *derrière-garde* aversion to the French Revolution, and the concomitant assumption that the French monarchy and the social and artistic traditions associated with it represent a Western cultural high-water mark. Beaumarchais gives voice to this tendency when he conjures up a vision of "history as it should have been" for the Queen: "The

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Revolution never happens . . . / A new age dawns. / Poverty is abolished. / Education is free . . . / New industries / Powered by wind, water and sunlight . . . / Antonia lives!" By extension, too, one could call the opera's very existence a gloss on nostalgia: openly displaying its infatuation with a time it imagines to be nobler and simpler, like those neo-Luddites of a few years back who brought "granny dresses" back into fashion, it implicitly confesses its fear that contemporary opera cannot be written.

And yet even this does not seem a fully satisfactory explanation of why an enterprise involving so much talent, energy and money should in the end seem so totally inconsequential. Searching for an answer, I happened on David Denby's review of Woody Allen's film *Shadows and Fog* in the March 30 issue of *New York* magazine, and I am indebted to him for getting so deftly to the heart of the "nostalgia" quandary. With its suggestions of Allen's personal filmmaking pantheon—Bergman, Resnais, Hitchcock—*Shadows and Fog*, Denby says, is "an *hommage* of a peculiarly contemporary sort, a mass of sophisticated clichés kidded by awareness. (The name for this, in art-world jargon, is 'post-modern pastiche.') . . . *Shadows and Fog* is indeed illusion, a likeness of a movie, all reference and no authentic being." It is shot through, Denby concludes, with "nostalgia for an art form that matters." So is *The Ghosts of Versailles*.

But I do not want to leave the subject without repeating that I was very much in the minority the evening I saw the opera: the audience was uninhibited in its enthusiasm. Teresa Stratas as Marie Antoinette and Håkan Hagegård as Beaumarchais came close to transmuting the material into artistically convertible coin, Renee Fleming as Rosina and Stella Zambalis as Cherubino vocalized ravishingly, and James Courtney was an amusing King. James Levine got all one could ask from the admirable Metropolitan orchestra.

The symphony, which the composer says was "generated by feelings of loss, anger and frustration" in response to "the AIDS epidemic," received performances on two occasions in New York last season. It was the first, its local premiere in four subscription concerts by the New York Philharmonic and Leonard Slatkin in Avery Fisher Hall in January, that I heard. In April, Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony brought it to Carnegie Hall.

The Philharmonic program dedicated the concerts to those who have died of AIDS, those who are living with AIDS and those who help and support them. Musicians and staff wore red ribbons in their lapels, and a table offering information about health organizations devoted to research, treatment and assistance was set up on the hall's Grand Promenade.

In a long expository note about the symphony in the Philharmonic's program book, Corigliano, an avowed homosexual, says, "A few years ago, I was extremely moved when I first saw 'the Quilt,' an ambitious interweaving of several thousand fabric panels, each memorializing a

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person who had died of AIDS, and, most importantly, each designed and constructed by his or her loved ones. This made me want to memorialize in music those I have lost, and reflect on those I am losing. I decided to relate the first three movements of the Symphony to three lifelong musician/friends. In the third movement, still other friends are recalled in a quilt-like interweaving of motivic melodies." Some forty minutes in length, and scored for an enormous orchestra whose percussion battery alone includes twenty-four familiar and exotic instruments, the work is dedicated to the pianist Sheldon Shkolnick, who died of AIDS a week after its premiere.

Though the work's movements employ vastly different instrumental combinations, rhythmic patterns, dynamics and tempos, one procedure is fundamental to all of it: the setting against one another, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes in alternation, of contrasting sonorities. Of thematic and harmonic development there is little; only in the third movement does it play a significant part.

The four movements are inscribed in the score as follows: 1. Apologue: Of Rage and Remembrance; 2. Tarantella; 3. Chaconne: Giulio's Song; and 4. Epilogue (the last two played without pause). The first movement's "Apologue," Corigliano's note reveals, is "an allegorical narrative usually intended to convey a moral," and is "cast in free large-scale ABA form." A long-held A on the violins and violas, heard again at the symphony's end, grows in intensity and volume, is answered by percussion, repeated, and climaxes in the entrance of the full orchestra and the initiation of a slow, steady *timpani* beat. A series of overlapping *accelerandos* is set off against "antagonistic chatterings of antiphonal brass," the score often calling for individual choirs to go their own way in "nonsynchronous" fashion. The middle section incorporates an offstage piano playing Leopold Godowsky's transcription of Isaac Albeniz's *Tango*, "a favorite piece of Shkolnick's," its theme alternating with "nostalgic themes" (that word again!) of remembrance. The first section, its steady beat and its multiple accelerations return in slightly different form and the movement ends with a recapitulation of its motives.

The second movement incorporates a tarantella Corigliano wrote in 1970 as one of a set of dances for friends to play. Dedicated to an amateur pianist and music-industry executive, the tarantella, the composer says, is "a jaunty little piece" that seems at odds with its origin as a "south Italian dance played at continually increasing speed," the performance of which was said to ward off a species of insanity attributed to the bite of the tarantula. The association of madness and the piano piece "proved both prophetic and bitterly ironic" when Corigliano's friend succumbed to AIDS dementia. The movement's insistent rhythm is interspersed with "hallucinatory" outbursts, some marked "dreamlike" and others "wild, demented and frenzied," and it ends in a massive *accelerando e crescendo possibile*—a

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"brutal scream" is the composer's phrase—that had some of the musicians not required to play covering their ears with their hands.

The third movement's anchor is a slow-moving chaconne based on successive chords constructed from the twelve notes of the chromatic scale. "Giulio" was an amateur cellist with whom the composer had taped some improvisations, and the principal theme heard over the chaconne, first played by a solo cello that is soon answered by another, was transcribed by Corigliano from the tape after his friend's death. For the "quilt-like interweaving of motivic melodies," Corigliano asked Hoffman, *Ghosts*' librettist, to eulogize a group of "lost friends"—cellist Fortunato Arico, pianist Paul Jacobs, director Jacques Chwat, computer designer Mark Pearson and music critic Robert Jacobson are among the names that appear in the score—in short sentences. He "then set those lines for various solo instruments and, removing the text, inserted them into the symphony" against the backdrop of the chaconne. The note A and the drumbeat of the first movement return and are transformed into a funeral march. After a "sonic explosion," the final Epilogue mixes the tango, the tarantella and the cello dialogues. The work fades into silence on the "perpetual A."

I have gone to some length in order to convey the extent of the composer's personal program for this work. Before the performance Slatkin addressed the audience, saying among other things that it was possible to enjoy the symphony without knowing anything of the circumstances of its composition. On the contrary, the degree to which Corigliano's program permeates the content and dictates the structure of the symphony, together with the tendentious atmosphere surrounding its presentation, militate against hearing the work as music and music alone. Some of the critical reaction to its debut illustrates the dilemma: Robert C. Marsh wrote in the Chicago *Sun-Times* that it is "a powerful, highly individual work, which has the assets of being socially relevant and musically distinctive." Are these assets separable for Marsh? And in fact Slatkin seemed to contradict his own podium assertion when he was quoted in the Philharmonic program book as saying that "many significant works of art have emerged from tragic events, but often the significance of the work is obscured by the art itself. On this occasion . . . I hope you will remember the composer's art and the emotions which brought it to life."

Corigliano reaches back to Berlioz, Mahler and Shostakovich as precedents for symphonists affected, he says, by "extramusical events." But it was Alban Berg's violin concerto, dedicated "to the memory of an angel"—Alma Mahler's daughter Manon Gropius, who died in 1935 at the age of eighteen—that came to mind as I listened to Corigliano's symphony. One reason is that there were more than a few musical echoes of Berg: to cite two of the most obvious, the "perpetual A" is a cousin of the orchestra's unison crescendo on B natural that follows Wozzeck's murder of Marie, and the first notes of

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the six-note cello theme in the third movement—four ascending whole steps, embracing the tritone—are identical to the first four notes Berg quotes from Bach's setting of the chorale "*Es ist genug*," the main building block of the violin concerto's final movement. Berg's use of the Bach quotation, and a fragment of a Carinthian folk song to suggest the young girl, also are early examples of the contemporary method of allusion and borrowing that stretches from Stravinsky and Milhaud through Shostakovich, Crumb, and Schnittke to the present and Corigliano.

But the absence of originality says nothing about quality. With a proclaimed eclectic such as Corigliano, influence-spotting is shooting fish in a barrel, and just as pointless. My aim in citing Berg's concerto is different: it is, by common consent, art of the highest caliber, a sublimation of personal grief by dint of genius into a threnody suffused with a sense of that mortality that finally catches up with us all. The only yardstick it is fair to apply is one that measures whether Corigliano similarly transcends his symphony's personal wellsprings and the proximate forces that thrust it into the spotlight. For at least one listener, the piece did not withstand repeated hearings. When the AIDS epidemic is finally brought under control, and is just one more painful chapter in mankind's continuous struggle against the manifold ills that beset the flesh, will Corigliano's symphony occupy a place commensurate with Berg's concerto? No one can be sure. But I doubt it very much.

I want to add one footnote to my reflections on *The Ghosts of Versailles*. Not long after I saw it, in late February, I attended the Juilliard Opera Center's "Celebration of 20th-Century Opera." Student singers and instrumentalists were led by Hal France and directed by Frank Corsaro in a melange of scenes from stage works by Bernstein, Walton, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Weill, Carlisle Floyd, Lee Hoiby and others. The evening was not distinguished musically: the young singers had fresh voices and a lot of zest, but many of them were stretched beyond their current capacities both musically and histrionically. The smallish orchestra offered only limited help. And it was Corsaro's mistake, one that sometimes bordered on the ludicrous, to try to string these disparate snippets together by having characters from one stroll into another, and similar directorial fancies. But one thing emerged clearly from the odd collection of scenes and arias: this century has produced much musical theater that has what Denby calls authentic being.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Hoping for Eternal Spring

IF EVER THERE WAS A PLACE where you could count on the survival of a ballet style and repertory, Copenhagen is it. In relative seclusion from the high-speed traffic of the international ballet world, Denmark's Royal Ballet has tended the choreographic genius of August Bournonville with devotion—and bouts of ambivalence—for a century. Bournonville occupied a pre-eminent place in Copenhagen's Royal Theater for fifty years, until his death in 1879, as a dancer, choreographer, director, and originator of a Danish style of dancing. After a posthumous generation of neglect, his ballets and his training system were rehabilitated and they've been kept up ever since as the distinctive standard for the Royal Danish Ballet. Except for isolated tours by the RDB, Bournonville wasn't that well known outside of Denmark. Few other companies attempted to produce even his major works, *Napoli* and *La Sylphide*. All the other ballets were rarities to us until the First Bournonville Festival, commemorating the centenary of the choreographer's death. The international dance press's rapturous response to that week of performances signified Bournonville's acceptance into the pantheon of ballet greats and also helped to polish up his somewhat dusty image at home.

But the company needed to present a contemporary face as well, and the renewed international interest in Bournonville increased the tensions between the new and old branches of the repertory. After 1979, the frequent touring and teaching of a chamber group led by Frank Andersen, now artistic director of the full company, and Dinna Bjorn, who now heads the Norwegian Ballet, preserved Bournonville's popularity outside Denmark and gave opportunities to those dancers who felt particularly drawn to the style. But when Andersen took over the RDB directorship in 1985, Bournonville training lapsed for a while, and now is only given twice a week. The dancing style in Copenhagen began to look more like what you'd see in New York or Paris. Big dramatic epics by John Neumeier, John Cranko, and Flemming Flindt absorbed the acting skills cultivated in the Bournonville ballets. However popular these splashy, sexy choreographies are with audiences, they don't exactly make it as Great and Worthy Works.

It was Frank Andersen's idea to spruce up the old master again by staging a second Bournonville festival this year, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of *Napoli*. At the end of March a hundred-plus foreign

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journalists, scholars and balletomanes were treated to eight performances—nearly all the extant ballets and divertissements—wrapped in a week of museum tours, lectures, open classes, films, and parties. Though the first festival gave me an indelible idea of Bournonville, this spring I realized how little I actually knew the ballets, having seen some of them only once or twice, so long ago, and only films or fragments ever since. The total immersion was almost as powerful an initiation as it had been the first time. But the sensation was different.

Despite the real reverence for the tradition, the strenuous and dedicated efforts made to keep the Bournonville canon alive, at this festival reformation seemed to be the key word. Frank Andersen sounded the theme on the first afternoon. Speaking from the stage of the old court theater as he opened a lecture-demonstration, he said the first festival had been a turning point for the company. "How were we handling our Bournonville tradition? Now there are new questions. We're trying to get to the original ballets but we know they have to be kept in constant motion. We have to give the old master the life he needs to be constantly interesting." While he said it had been "a privilege to have grown up in Bournonville's house," Andersen noted that times are changing. "What was challenging and 'right' ten, fifteen or thirty years ago is not quite right now."

And in the days that followed, the question of what's the "right" Bournonville nagged at me relentlessly. Were the ballets just slightly less enchanting than they had been in '79? Or was it I who had changed? Probably some of both. The Danes themselves have conflicts about Bournonville. Except when the world descends on them to honor it, they get bored with this home product. The more modern ballets enter the repertory, the less patience they have for Bournonville's plots and exoticisms, for the finicky cleverness of his most characteristic enchaînements. The more the audience gets accustomed to the long, strong, glamourous look of contemporary classicism, the less it can appreciate the precision and modest charm of Bournonville dancing. But is it unreasonable to insist on these qualities? Or—trickier—at what stage of making it interesting for today do we lose the ballet's distinction?

The surviving Bournonville repertory is small but far from styleless, and virtually all of it was seen at the festival. There are seven ballets, one reconstituted since the 1979 festival; plus several excerpts or divertissements from larger works. The two-act *La Ventana* has unobtrusively slipped from the first category to the second. An eighth ballet, *The Lay of Thrym*, was reconstructed recently but was shown in full only on videotape. The performances took us from the most familiar venue, a ballet studio (*Konservatoriet*), to the scene of Oriental miracles (*Abdallah*). Danish troops dallied with local cuties at home (*The King's Volunteers on Amager*) and in the tropics (*Far From Denmark*). The Christian and the beautiful triumphed over sinister heathen powers, in a nearby troll hill (*A Folk Tale*) and in the exotic Blue Grotto

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(*Napoli*). And stepping out of one's place was sure to bring ridicule for social climbers (*Kermesse in Bruges*) and outright disaster for mortals foolish enough to chase the unattainable (*La Sylphide*).

All these excursions into storybook land inspire wonderful staging and stagecraft. When you see the detail of a Bournonville scene, the complexity and veracity with which each element is worked out, you begin to appreciate what this tradition really is. Our stripped-down *Sleeping Beauty*s and mimeless *Giselle*s may suit the pace of modern life, but after Bournonville they also signal that modern life on the stage is underfunded, makeshift, and skin-deep. Bournonville offers not only lavish production and stagecraft, but intimate dramaturgy. Any child or adult in the crowd of *Napoli* can probably tell you the name of his or her character and why that character happens to wander by the waterfront just at the moment Gennaro and Teresina set off for a moonlight sail in his fishing boat.

The pride that Danish dancers have in their lifetime engagement with Bournonville, graduating from acting and dancing children's roles to corps or principal dancers to older character roles, results in an extraordinary sense of ensemble on their stage. Because they belong in their roles and in the community they're creating, they can generate a collective pacing. They can build excitement and tension through a whole performance, not just its individual solos or ensemble numbers, an overall dramatic curve that probably hasn't been seen on ballet stages since the decline of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in the forties.

I think this ensemble playing is more than good acting. In the best sense of tradition, it comes from the workings of a real community, a blurring of the lines between the stage and the theater life. Danish dancers speak about their roles like events that have happened to them, or enjoyable trips they've taken, or interesting new subjects they're learning. When they enter into a ballet, they join a whole personal acquaintance of individuals, a family and friends who have their work and opinions, crotchets, secrets, and dreams. Quite miraculously, these characters know each other very well onstage, but not so well that their adventures become automatic. It's their interaction as characters that propels the energy of a scene, as much as their collective response to a conductor's tempi and dynamics.

So even when the plots are incredible or quaint, the domestic Bournonville ballets are a rare pleasure to watch. Woven into communities with the usual characters—temporarily estranged lovers, watchful parents, friends and rivals—there are always oddballs who get treated, as much as possible, as if they too belong. Flemming Ryberg plays a henpecked farmer with a long, sad face in *The King's Volunteers on Amager*, who tunes out by drinking steadily with his cronies; when his wife drags him away, he's glassy-eyed and has to be steered from one place to another. Everyone knows the behavior of these eccentrics. It's only when someone doesn't respect them that

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trouble starts. Sorella Englund's Madge in *La Sylphide* is just a withdrawn beggarwoman who crouches in corners, until James tries to eject her from the house. Then she vows to destroy him with the evil magic she usually keeps hidden.

It's when these individual portraits get smoothed out that the Bournonville charm slips. In the newly designed production of *A Folk Tale* (scenery and costumes by Queen Margrethe II, staging by Anne Marie Vessel and Frank Andersen), the amicability of peasants, gypsies, trolls, gentry and their servants who live near each other has somehow congealed into a hierarchy of cartoonish clans. A communal atmosphere goes haywire when the dance style gets infected by too much twentieth-century aggressiveness. Nikolai Hubbe's technically superb but expressively self-assured James looks more like the slumming Duke Albrecht in *Giselle* than the country boy dazzled by the Sylphide. Lis Jeppesen as the troll-girl brought up by aristocrats in *A Folk Tale* begins the ballet with flamboyant fits of temper, and virtuosic feats like standing on pointe a long time instead of Bournonville's chattering footwork. Long before she's supposed to discover her true nature in a schizophrenic third-act solo, she looks demented and out of place.

While tiny shifts in emphasis like this can put a work out of kilter, a newly conceived ballet can be very convincing, like Toni Lander, Bruce Marks and Flemming Ryberg's 1985 resurrection of *Abdallah*, which had disappeared over a century ago. And sometimes wholesale renovations of a favorite can improve it. *Napoli* received a new production for its 150th birthday, but it wasn't primarily the new designs (by Søren Frandsen) that distinguished the event. The scenography, as well as the staging of the Act I waterfront scene and the celebratory last act, have remained true to their traditional picturesque realism. It's in Dinna Bjorn's resetting of the second act that a more modern approach is evident, and it works.

As Bjorn explained the first day at the court theater, most of the second act choreography was irretrievably lost, and in renovating the act she saw the main problem as a dramatic one. Previously the plot turned entirely on the conflict between supernatural forces: the undersea king, Golfo, captures the drowned Teresina and transforms her into a naiad. (This is the pretext for a female corps of watery maidens to appear in a set of abstract dances similar to the "white acts" of wilis, swans and bayadères that proliferated in nineteenth-century ballets.) When Gennaro comes searching for her, she's forgotten everything earthly, and is recalled to life only by the medal of the Madonna that he wears around his neck.

Bjorn's more modern interpretation gives Teresina a sublimated sexuality that engages her in a more psychologically plausible conflict. Golfo isn't only evil, but erotically attractive. When she struggles against his power, she's resisting not only the underworld but her own carnal instincts. She defeats them and, after failing to seduce her in a

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pas de deux, Golfo enrolls her in his presumably sexless though ornamental harem of naiads. When Gennaro arrives, what rouses and saves Teresina is not only the Virgin but the power of his love. Bournonville ballets are full of the joy of life, says Dinna Bjorn, because his people have lived through temptations and are happy to marry and have a family.

With this strengthening of the dramatic underpinnings, plus a new choreographic scheme, the refurbished *Napoli* Act II was a big success. And it was only the most noticeable of many passages reworked or reconsidered to attain a clearer contemporary reading of Bournonville. The choreographer left a remarkable amount of documentation for future interpreters: scenarios, notes, voluminous memoirs and diaries covering every phase of his travels, his theater and community life. It seemed to me that the directors in this feast of ballets were subtly bringing out two sides of Bournonville that weren't so apparent last time, his nationalism and his religious fervor. No Boy Scout in real life, Bournonville nevertheless filled his ballets with love of country and Christian faith.

I suppose for anyone looking at ballet today, the romantic period is problematic. Can we find anything to identify with in these stories about villagers and townfolk who always discover that it's best not to adventure too far from home, religion, and spouse? Stories where gossip and mischief are allowed, but only if they serve to reinforce the social order? Scenes of exotic sylphs and seductive locales that we voyeurs are allowed to see only because they demonstrate that anyone who succumbs to them will be punished? There's enough of the postmodern in me that on one level I'm deeply suspicious of these fairy tales. Their morality only works in a world much more stable, monolithic and innocent than mine. Of course we're nostalgic for that world, for that sweetness and comfort. I understand—kind of—how the audience can get all choked up when the Danish flag is raised on the deck of the troop ship stationed in Buenos Aires, as the present Queen looks on benevolently from the royal box. I even cry when the girl Hilda in *A Folk Tale*, who's been brought up by the trolls, finally crawls into the lap of her real nurse, safe and sound in the home from which she was stolen as a baby.

But what position is a modern person placed in when she's asked to look kindly on the stereotyped blackface servants in at least two ballets? Bournonville explicitly said the servants in *Far From Denmark* were *not* slaves, and *Kermesse in Burges* is a burlesque anyway. But that still doesn't excuse the minstrel show behavior, the pickaninny makeup, the implied stupidity and greed that these characters embody. Another black stereotype in *Kermesse* is the flouncing, Josephine Bakerish grande dame who shows up at a parvenu party. The management doesn't hesitate to make substantial changes elsewhere, so why are these exaggerated images preserved? If the arabesque has

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risen to shoulder height since Bournonville's time, racial attitudes have evolved too.

Much as we might wish to see classic ballets exhibited in mint condition like our favorite paintings in a museum, dance can't be captured like that. Every glimpse of the past provokes momentous questions. What constitutes a perceptible change in a dance work? What is an allowable change? At what point does allowable change become a betrayal of the work? What is a desirable change, even when we know it represents something not intended by the original producers? How much are we willing to sacrifice to modernity? Do we give up something by wanting dancers to adopt non-modern styles of dancing? Do we gain something? Are the audience's answers the same as those of the dancers? Are there any answers? For me, it's only through the excruciatingly costly process of preserving and performing repertory that anything further can be learned.

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BERT CARDULLO

Love without Pity

Love without Pity, the first film by the young writer-director Eric Rochant, recalls at least three other French films: Godard's *Breathless* (1960), Jean Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore* (1973), and Bertrand Blier's *Going Places* (1974). *Love without Pity* doesn't do much cinematic quoting from the movie that introduced the French New Wave to the world—it does not proceed alternately by long takes (often photographed with a hand-held camera) and jump cuts—but it does borrow a situation or two from *Breathless* in order to respond to critics' conception of that work's hero as an existentially alienated, latter-day Romantic. And Rochant's film takes from *The Mother and the Whore* its ex-student pushing thirty who does no work of any kind as he tries to decide on the right woman for himself, from *Going Places* its improvisationally hedonistic two pals who live by petty crime, from both movies its post-leftist Paris in which political revolution has lost its urgency and Sartrean inquiry is dead. So *Love without Pity* is thematically derivative, not daring, and, compared to most products of the French New Wave, cinematically conventional. But it is nonetheless a welcome and charming refrain in the wake of the fall of Communism, the end of the Cold War, and the democratization of eastern Europe. Utopia has failed and capitalism prevailed, yet there are still those who refuse to join the bourgeoisie. For them, there are only two passions left to pursue: love and sex, the mother and the whore.

At the start of *Love without Pity*, as he walks through the streets of Paris to the accompaniment of Gérard Torikian's simultaneously jaunty and melancholy music, Hippo tells us in voice-over which passion he has been reduced to pursuing: "If we could at least be mad at someone. If we could at least be useful . . . Nothing to do but fall in love. What else have they left us?" He has tried philandering but become bored with it; one of his conquests, Francine, trails him during the film as a symbol of that boredom. Then he meets Nathalie one night while parking his heap of a car and determines to love her. She is a hard-working graduate student and translator of Russian; Hippo is a self-described "machine for living" who has no money, no job, and no future. He sponges off his drug-dealing teenaged brother, Xavier, with whom he shares an apartment, and he passes his days doing nothing except playing cards, watching television, and chasing girls with his like-minded friend Halpern. Until he runs into Nathalie, who initially resists his advances but who is undeniably attracted to

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him, if not to the way he lives. Their courtship can hardly be said to proceed in a traditional (movie-) manner, since Nathalie spends most of her time working and Hippo spends most of his waiting to see her. They sleep together (off-camera) on their first date, so sexual conquest cannot be his aim in continuing to pursue her. During that first date, from Nathalie's balcony overlooking the Eiffel Tower and the roofs of Paris, Hippo waxes poetic about the romantic appeal of the Parisian night in what seems to be the film's only bow to conventional movie romance, but is really a Romantic apostrophe to the mystery and abandon of darkness.

Hippo likes Nathalie so much that he's willing to change his ways in order to get her: "If you want, I'll work," he declares, and when she gets an offer to teach at M.I.T. for a year, he agrees to move with her to Boston. Nathalie affects Hippo to such an extent that he calls his alter ego and houseguest, Halpern, a slob for leaving dirty dishes in the sink and upraids his brother and disciple for cruelly dumping his girlfriend, Adeline. But Hippo does not unite with Nathalie and journey to America. On his way to meet her at a party before their departure, he is arrested for driving a stolen (abandoned, he says) car and she must leave without him. That car, which Hippo has been driving throughout the movie, recalls the stolen car(s) driven by Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) in *Breathless*, and a consideration of the role of crime in the plot of each of these films will reveal the fundamental difference between their main characters. Like Michel, Hippo is seen early in *Love without Pity* singing to himself as he drives someone else's car; also like his Godardian counterpart, he is soon stopped by the police. But Hippo is stopped for driving a wreck, Michel for speeding in a new Oldsmobile; moreover, the former simply chides the police for harassing him and they let him go without checking his vehicle's registration, whereas the latter immediately kills the motorcycle cop who pulls him over.

Wanted for murder at the same time that he wants Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg), a young woman playing the role of an American intellectual in Paris, Michel is eventually shot to death by policemen after Patricia betrays him and he nevertheless refuses to escape in a confrere's Simca. His criminal ways combined with his romantic devotion to one woman have cost him his life. Michel is less the existential hero in extremis, however, a man for whom crime is the instrument of his Romantic rebellion and death a release from the constrictions of civilized life, than a hoodlum on the run—and one whose character derives from as well as parodies the outlaws of such Hollywood films as *You Only Live Once* (1936), *High Sierra* (1941), *White Heat* (1949), and *Gun Crazy* (1950)—while his "romantic attachment" remains just that, an attachment without an identity, and consequently an integrity, of her own. Hippo for his part, after heedlessly continuing to drive the same stolen car to Nathalie's whereabouts—at home, at university, at work—and almost no place else, is finally

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detained by the police and thereby prevented from joining his love during her visit to the United States. His disregard for the law together with his romantic devotion to one woman has cost him only his relationship with that woman (and only for a year) and a brief spell in jail. Hippo remains in the end the Romantic hero reconciled to the reality of his earthly existence: perpetual alienation from society and perpetual quest for Nathalie, the purest embodiment he can find of the eternally feminine.

At the conclusion of *Love without Pity*, he sits at the airport with Halpern on the hood of another wreck of a car, waiting for Nathalie to return from Boston. A year has passed, yet no cinematic device has indicated the passage of time, which suggests that everything has stayed the same in Hippo's life. He is still, in his words, a "parasite," a "zero," and he is still consumed with his passion for Nathalie. She is picked up at the airport by two male friends, who drive through the parking lot where Hippo and Halpern wait. Nathalie smiles at Hippo from the back seat as her car passes, and that only strengthens his resolve to see her again. The camera freezes on a final image of him and Halpern continuing to sit there, looking out at Nathalie as she gradually disappears into traffic. Time has ceased to exist in the world of the frozen frame, which captures Hippo for eternity in a state of longing after an impossible ideal: union with Nathalie and, through her, with the natural or unconstrained world and the infinite universe.

Pierre Novion has photographed *Love without Pity* in a manner that intimates the impossibility of such an ideal. His images are suffused with a cold blue light that sometimes nearly extinguishes all other color, not with the sunny postcard prettiness that we have come to associate with most film romances, nor for that matter with the shadowed, misty gloom in which the ill-fated love affairs of *film noir* grind to their conclusion. Why blue light? First, because its coolness is not emotionally inviting to an audience; the look of this film tells us right away that Rochant wants more than simply an emotional reaction or identification from us. The work is entitled *Love without Pity*, and I take that to mean love without *sentimentality*—either on Hippo's part or Nathalie's, either in Rochant's direction or the audience's response; in other words, love whose feeling is designed, not to engender pity, empathy, or admiration, but to exist as nothing more than pure feeling.

Far more than black and white would, bluish light casts an air of unreality as well as coolness over the film's proceedings. And an air of unreality is exactly what Romantic emotion—emotion so pure and writ so large that it cannot be sustained or reciprocated for long—requires, especially when depicted in so realistic a medium as film. The realism, or in this case irony, of the medium is represented in *Love without Pity* by three devices in addition to realistic locations,

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all of which exist in contradistinction to the film's unreal color and thus serve to set its Romanticism in relief, if not to bring it down to earth. The first of these devices is the political report, which comes over the radio, on television, or in conversation among Hippo, Halpern, and friends. We hear of strife between blacks and whites in South Africa; we see documentary footage of the March on Washington to end the Vietnam War; and we listen to a discussion about the fate of the worker in a dismantled Soviet Union. The second device is the film's offbeat humor, which sometimes combines with its political incursions to produce a remark like Halpern's that the Jewish Nathalie works so hard because she's afraid if she doesn't, she will be sent to a death camp; what Halpern doesn't explain is why he—also a Jew—doesn't feel the same compulsion to overwork! Similarly, there is Hippo's deadpan response to Nathalie's inquiry about his means of financial support: "I live off my brother. He deals drugs," which is a kind of social commentary on the troubled world beyond the frame and which, unlike the "cute" humor of a romantic comedy like *When Harry Met Sally . . .* (1989), is antisentimental.

It's antisentimental, that is, if it is played that way, if the acting—the third device—is under- rather than overstated, if the performers play against rather than with their lines. Happily, Hippolyte Giradot (Hippo), Mireille Perrier (Nathalie), and Yvan Attal (Halpern) do just that. Giradot reminds me of a taller, less pronounced Jean-Pierre Léaud, Truffaut's impulsive alter ego in a number of films. Perrier, who was Claire Denis's alter ego in *Chocolat* (1988), is a woman of quiet eloquence and refined beauty—precisely the qualities Nathalie requires if she is to be believable both as a figure of Hippo's imagination, a projection of his fantasies, and a complex human being in her own right. In both his physical appearance and his romantic exploits, Yvan Attal represents the most earthbound of the three major characters, a cinematic foil to Hippo and his love affair with Nathalie. He begins the film with a harsh rejection over an intercom from his girlfriend, Stéphanie, whom we never see, and he ends it without having replaced her with another woman. His only bonding is of the male kind, with Hippo, though there isn't a hint of homosexuality between them as there was between the two young men in *Going Places*.

Zhang Yimou's first film as a director, *Red Sorghum* (1987), was a beneficiary of China's first open-door policy since the launching of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, having achieved international distribution as well as wide release in its native land. Zhang's second and third films to be shown outside China, *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), which were produced by the Japanese and the Taiwanese respectively, have been forbidden release to the Chinese public—in part because each was nominated for an Oscar as best foreign-language movie and each was the winner of a prize at a major

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Western film festival. What surer sign, in the wake of the events of Tiananmen Square, that these works espouse bourgeois liberal values, to be seen in their flouting of the sexual norms that define the institution of marriage, their harrowing portrait of the systematic oppression of women, and their allegorical implication that young Chinese should rebel against the brutal, autocratic rule of impotent old men?

I wish to discuss *Ju Dou* here because I think it is the best of the forty-one-year-old Zhang's three films to arrive in the United States. All of his work, which is visually stunning, is drawn from contemporary Chinese fiction set in the 1920s or 1930s; all of it features the at once subtle and supple, sensible and sensual Gong Li in the leading female roles; and all of it treats the struggle of young women against patriarchally defined circumstances—specifically, in the films of his I have seen, against arranged marriages. In *Ju Dou*, that marriage is to the vile old owner of a dye factory who has tortured to death his two previous wives for not bearing him a son. *Ju Dou* interests me more than the other two films that have been shown here because it is more complex, more complete: it deals with the issue of filial piety in addition to that of female victimization; it implicates its lovers in their fate; and it humanizes their nemesis. In short, *Ju Dou* has the makings of tragedy, not merely of pathos.

The film takes place in the 1920s in rural northwestern China, where Jinshan Yang (Li Wei) runs a dye factory whose apparatus—wheels and ropes, vats and posts—is huge, even monstrous, but for the operation of which the miserly Jinshan retains only one employee, his fortyish nephew and surrogate son, Tianqing (Li Baotian), whom he mercilessly dominates. The dye factory functions metaphorically in two ways: as a kind of machine in which human beings are only cogs who can be devoured or expelled at any time—a metaphor emphasized by the many full-to-long shots of the factory, in which people appear small if they appear at all, interspersed with close-ups of its synchronized workings rather than of the workers themselves; and as a place where the artificial is imposed on the natural, where natural fabrics are dyed artificial colors—especially the color red. Into this combination dye factory and domicile comes the beautiful young Ju Dou (Gong Li) as wife and worker. Jinshan has paid quite a price to get her, he tells us, and he beats her sadistically when she fails to bear him a son, even though his impotence seems to be the reason she does not become pregnant.

Looking for a way out of her predicament at the same time that she is naturally attracted to a man closer to her in age, Ju Dou initiates a clandestine affair with her husband's diffident nephew—an affair that would be considered incestuous as well as adulterous in China. The lovers soon produce a son, Tianbai, who they pretend is Jinshan's

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own,[1] and continue their secret liaison undisturbed until one day Jinshan is paralyzed below the waist by a fall down a ravine. Tianqing did not have to rescue his uncle but nonetheless did so out of familial devotion, only to torture him by subsequently revealing his illicit relationship with Ju Dou and the true paternity of Tianbai. In retaliation, the enraged old man attempts to kill the child and its parents in a fire but is thwarted, after which Ju Dou and Tianqing refrain from murdering him so that he may live to suffer at the sight of their happiness. Suffer Jinshan does, but he also rejoices as the growing Tianbai warms to the man he believes to be his father and questions his mother's affection for Tianqing. Then one day, while playing with the child, the old man accidentally drowns in a dye vat; his death leads to gossip among the villagers about the relationship between Ju Dou and Tianqing; and continuing gossip over a period of eight years drives the teenaged Tianbai to drown his mother's lover in the same dye vat that took his father, in horrified response to which Ju Dou burns down the factory—Tianbai's inheritance—and immolates herself along with it.

Now the only reason Jinshan lives long enough to form a deadly bond with Tianbai, aside from the lovers' desire to torment him with their extramarital bliss, is Tianqing's unwillingness, out of filial piety, to murder his uncle (which the exasperated Ju Dou twice urges him to do). And the only reason the couple doesn't flee Jinshan and his dye factory is Tianqing's—not Ju Dou's—unwillingness to "go public" with their adultery. So Tianqing's fearful, feudally loyal character proves to be his destiny, but—and here's the rub—it also proves to be Ju Dou's under a patriarchal order. Instead of killing Jinshan herself, she wants her lover to do the job; instead of insisting that he escape the factory with her, she remains behind with him; and instead of surviving Tianqing's death, she sacrifices herself to his memory, to their love. A number of commentators have mentioned *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946 and 1981) in the same breath with *Ju Dou*, and they could have mentioned in addition Pierre Chenal's *Le dernier tournant* (1939) and Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942), both also based on James M. Cain's *Postman*, together with Antonioni's *Cronaca di un amore* (1950). But there are cardinal differences between *Ju Dou* and these films: Tianqing and Ju Dou fail to run away together, not because she opts for the economic security of life with her husband, but because he fears that they will be executed if their adultery is uncovered; Tianqing and Ju Dou never plot to murder Jinshan, let

[1] As Chinese tradition dictated at the time, the village elders give the newborn Tianbai his name, choosing it on account of its connection with his surrogate "brother's" name, Tianqing. When the suffixes of the two names are joined, the result is "qing-bai," which ironically means "innocent from any guilt" or "purity." Extending the irony, the chief elder solemnly declares, "One bad first name can bring a line to ruin."

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alone succeed in killing him, and he is actually sorry to learn of his uncle's accidental death; she has a child by her lover—a "bad seed" who is instrumental in the deaths of all three members of the love triangle. Ironically, it is Tianqing and Ju Dou's failure to run away, not the act of running away itself, that leads to his "execution" for adultery and her consequent suicide. Equally ironically, it is Tianqing's reluctance to murder his uncle, rather than the act of murder itself, that gets him killed in the end by the boy whom Jinshan had the time—thanks to his nephew—to turn into his own son. The child himself imparts an air of fatedness to the action that is largely missing from the aforementioned films, especially in his menacingly silent witness as a teenager to his mother and Tianqing's sexual appetite.

An air of fatedness is also imparted to the action of *Ju Dou* by its deployment of red, the color the Chinese find the most evocative. This color figures prominently—as you might guess!—in *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern* as well as *Ju Dou*, for which Gu Changwei served as the cinematographer (as he did for Zhang's first feature), and in each film it takes on a double meaning. "While red is the color of life, it is also the color of death," Zhang has said. So the accidental unraveling of a long bolt of red cloth as Tianqing and Ju Dou make love for the first time next to a dye vat functions as a metaphor not only for the unleashing of sexual passion, but also for the inevitable loosing of violent impulses with it—in the fire that Jinshan sets for revenge; in Tianbai's drowning of Tianqing in a red dye vat, where a long bolt of red cloth unfurls down onto his inert body, just as long pieces of red cloth inscribed with poetic epitaphs had earlier surrounded Jinshan's coffin during his funeral procession; in the fire that Ju Dou ignites to destroy both the factory and herself.

The musical equivalent of this equivocal use of color occurs in a grim, even nightmarish ballad sung three times during *Ju Dou*: once by village children playing outdoors as Tianqing passes by, before he has become involved with Ju Dou; a second time by the couple, to their baby boy, after Jinshan's paralyzing fall; and a third time by the children again, over the final frozen frame of the burning dye factory. The ballad tells of an attack by a pack of dogs on people who are unable to run away, who are frozen in their tracks and consequently torn to shreds. The first two times we hear it, the song is striking, even invigorating, because it is sung in fun by persons who believe themselves to be immune to its terrors, and because it is apparently a child's lively invention. The third time we hear it, the ballad is pitiless, even morbid, because it continues to be sung in youthful fun despite what has happened to its two previous singers, despite the fact that Tianqing and Ju Dou's love has been sacrificed to the watchdogs of gerontocratic morality.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Tradition and Some Individual Talents

THE MOST ORIGINAL AND AMBITIOUS NOVEL PUBLISHED earlier this year was Robert Stone's *Outerbridge Reach*, about which I've had my say in another place. After Stone, the two novels that seemed to me most fully realized and distinct are Nicholson Baker's *Vox* and Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*. Baker is thirty-five, Phillips thirty-four; Baker is a WASP and Phillips is a West Indian educated in Britain. It would be hard to name two novelists who, except for their youth and the fact that they've each published three previous novels, have absolutely nothing in common except a way with writing. Compared to these works, the other novels and stories considered here, intelligent and engaging as to various degrees they all are, feel a bit subsidiary. Not a masterpiece in the lot—which is surprising, since someone in the *New York Times Book Review* manages to find a new one each week. But the variety and entertaining liveliness of their different styles and subjects reminds us again that contemporary fiction—a lot of it, anyway—is still written for adults and provides satisfactions not to be disdained.

Reference to "adults" seems to have gotten me into Nicholson Baker's little tour de force about phone sex.[1] Until some months ago I'd never heard of Baker but then was teased into reading his *U and I* because of its subject: the novelist's obsession with the work and character of John Updike. *U and I* is a gem of a book, wonderfully rereadable, containing something verbally interesting in just about every sentence. Here is an instance: Baker is admiring Updike's aplomb during a Dick Cavett television interview, comparing it with his own (Baker's) relative ineptitude. Updike's performance was one in which "he spoke in swerving, rich, complex paragraphs of unhesitating intelligence that he finally allowed to glide to rest at the curb with a little downward swallowing smile of closure, as if he almost felt that he ought to apologize for his inability even to fake the need to grope for his expression." Then Baker remembers a documentary about Updike in which

[1] VOX, by *Nicholson Baker*. Random House. $15.00.

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> as the camera follows his climb up a ladder at his mother's house to put up or take down some storm windows, in the midst of this tricky physical act, he tosses down to us some startlingly lucid little felicity, something about "These small yearly duties which blah blah blah" and I was stunned to recognize that in Updike we were dealing with a man so naturally verbal that he could write his fucking memoirs *on a ladder*!

If you warm immediately to this you'll want to read Baker, all of him. His first two novels are *The Mezzanine* and *Room Temperature*; all four books are short, published within the last four years, and yielding a high intensity rate per page.

As Deborah Garrison pointed out in her fine review of *Vox* in *The New Yorker* ("Phoning It In," March 9), Baker's "obsessive thoroughness," his fascination with every nuance of human desire and response, is "intrinsically seductive"—sexy, even; thus in hindsight the explicit treatment of phone sex could have been predicted. As everyone knows by now, this is a novel in which a man and a woman talk each other off, long-distance. At one point the man, speculating on the difference between written and visual porn decides that "I guess insofar as verbal pornography records thoughts rather than exclusively images, or at least surrounds all images with thoughts, or something, it can be the hottest medium of all." *Vox* is a hot medium full of art: finely-tuned conversational sentences; inventive words for private parts ("frans" for breasts, "crank" and "Delgado" for penis); some quite impressive sexual fantasies, and, as it were, a potent conclusion. (Since this is a family magazine I desist from quoting further.) It's an art that manages to be sexy enough so that one is just slightly embarrassed to be caught listening in on the proceedings. Would John Crowe Ransom or Yvor Winters or F.R. Leavis approve? Perhaps not. The only novel I can remember feeling in this double art-sex way about is Terry Southern's *Blue Movie* (more about Southern later). So although I'm aware that a number of good readers, both here and in England, have been unamused and unimpressed by *Vox*, I put myself firmly in the yes I will, Yes, column.

David Lodge's novel begins promisingly with a lively scene at Heathrow where a representative for Travelwise Tours is attempting to assemble his passengers, headed for Honolulu:[2]

> "Where are they going? Honolulu, Honolulu! I ask you—it must take 'em all day to get there."
>
> "Eighteen and a half hours," says Trevor. "Including change of planes at Los Angeles."

[2] PARADISE NEWS, by *David Lodge*. Viking. $21.00.

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"Eighteen and a half hours cooped up in one of those oversized sardine cans? Must be mad. They're all mad, if you ask me . . ."

"It's the novelty, innit," says Trevor. "I mean, Majorca, who'd go to Majorca anymore? It's dead common. Blackpool by the Med. Same with Florida, even the Caribbean. You got to keep going further and further to get away from the Joneses."

The writing is crisply paced, the passengers deftly sketched in a manner that looks to be promisingly satirical. In fact Mr. Lodge, as in previous novels of his like *Changing Places*, is much too nice a fellow to compete with nasty Brits such as Kingsley Amis or A.N. Wilson. His chief character, a lecturer in theology at a depressing British university, is taking his reluctant father to Honolulu to visit the father's dying sister. Bernard Walsh, the son, is a thoroughly decent chap, though shy about sex, and in the course of the prolonged visit (Bernard's father immediately breaks his leg and has to go to hospital) he meets an admirable divorcée every bit as decent as he and sexually more nuanced. Lodge is a capable writer and observer but lacks—both as novelist and in his criticism—any really original way with language. Instead he concentrates on constructing a neat plot (and does it very well), provides lots of observations about Hawaii and tourism, makes a clever if not very deep connection between sightseeing and religious aspirations—the "Paradise News" of the title—and explores what I take to be his complicated feelings about religion (he began, at least, as a Catholic). But without any notable intensity, comic or otherwise, in the texture of the writing from page to page, *Paradise News* becomes no more than a pleasant, slightly too long entertainment.

More seriously disappointing, since I had higher hopes for it, is Graham Swift's latest, an attempt to recapture the complicated unease of his *Waterland* (1983).[3] That book was full of Dickens and eels and very good *Great Expectations*-like writing about childhood, as well as a lot of nagging big-question talk about History and Reality. *Ever After* fusses with the same ultimate subjects and (as in *Waterland*) there are wheels within wheels, an inset story about the narrator's great-great-grandfather Matthew, a Victorian racked by Darwinian doubts to the point where he leaves his wife and children. The narrator, an enervated temporary academic named Bill Unwin, whose own wife committed suicide (she was dying of lung cancer) and who has tried to kill himself and botched the job, wrestles with his predecessor's journals, trying to make sense out of Matthew's and his own life. (Bill's father also killed himself, and his mother died painfully—Swift's fiction never lacks for terrible things happening.)

Graham Swift has a marvelous ear, is exceptionally gifted at getting

[3] EVER AFTER, by *Graham Swift*. Alfred A. Knopf. $21.00.

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down the sentence sounds of his bothered protagonist as he lacerates himself and academic life generally:

> Before they [the dons] are sixty, they are emulating one of the many varieties: the crusty and cantakerous; the bald and bumbling; the silver-haired exquisite; the bespectacled and tousled distrait; the free-wheeling eccentric; the wide-eyed, latter-day infant, helpless in all mundane matters but possessed of a profound understanding of Sanskrit. By seventy or eighty—and there is no reason, given the pampering they get, why they shouldn't go on for decades—they are convinced they have reached their true flowering and that, whatever their status in their particular fields (though eminence may be assumed) they are, in themsleves, rare birds, exceptional cases, worthy of living enshrinement.

This is invigorating, as are the hero's evocations of childhood memories, of his mother and father, of his love for his dead wife. But in what seems to me an overreaching gesture, Swift gives us a lot of Unwin the historian, speculating endlessly on what his ancestor *really* felt about science and religion and love after he saw an ichthyosaur and his unbelief began. There are frequent references to *Hamlet* and an overwrought atmosphere—similar to the classroom scenes in *Waterland*—that eventually grows wearisome. And the echoes of Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman* feel so strong as to be obtrusive, though Fowles's narrative is if anything less troubled than Swift's. Somehow *Ever After* seems too sheerly fabricated for the good of its own artistic life; on every page you can view the workings of an intelligent novelistic mind, at the same time as the finished product feels somewhat insulated and artificial, much ado about something we can't quite care enough about.

There's a similar problem with Robb Forman Dew's suburban chronicle of the Howells family, first studied in her first novel, *Dale Loves Sophie to Death*.[4] Husband and wife, two children—the older of whom is about to depart for Harvard College, nice small town, called West Bradford but clearly Williamstown, Mass. (at the intersection of Routes 2 and 7 as the novel specifies), nice friends, exquisite taste about things generally. There's been a tragedy—their youngest child was killed in a freak accident—but during the course of the novel nothing very bad happens and the son ends up headed indeed for Harvard. Yet the family atmosphere is close to excruciating; nobody ever really says the right thing; the wife Dinah's ceaseless quest to anticipate the demands and minister to the psyches of others seems doomed to frustration and failure. A terrible person wanders in, a single parent named Netta (with her child, always referred to as Anna

[4] FORTUNATE LIVES, by *Robb Forman Dew*. William Morrow & Company. $20.00.

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Tyson) who is allowed far too much emotional space in the Howells' kitchen. The novelist sketches this figure in all her awful features:

> Even though it was soft, Netta's voice had the quality of carrying, with a syllable here or there flashing out in absolute clarity as though her confidences were like the metallic threads in Dinah's skirt, illuminated randomly by any light. "Oh, I haven't really minded. I know how *threatening* stray people can be. But I guess I was surprised. Oh yes . . ." Her note was that of resignation, not anger. Resignation with a touch of perplexity.

But just as Dinah refrains from tossing the pest out of her house, Robb Forman Dew's tolerance for Netta, for the spoiled Harvard-headed offspring (kind of a lout, I thought), for Howells *mère* and *père* themselves, reaches dangerous proportions. It may be that she believes most families live lives of quiet desperation and that to orchestrate such lives into a novel, with no large significant events or dramatic climaxes, is a mark of realism. It may also be that somehow, in the midst of so much delicate, patient observation and registration, a sufficiently compelling story just failed to generate itself. I'm in sympathy with what I take to be Ms. Dew's artistic principles; I just wish the novel that has resulted were more sharply pointed, more aggressively challenging both to its characters and its readers.

A couple of modest, convincing works by younger writers:[5] Christopher Bohjalian's has its epigraph from Donald Hall about how baseball is continuous, "an endless game of repeated summers, joining the long generations of all the fathers and all the sons." I could never get my father to play enough catch with me, and didn't play enough catch with my sons, so I need the occasional book about baseball. This is a Little League one, the best parts of which trace a father's efforts to coach a team in a small Vermont town. Bill Parrish's son, Nathaniel, has died of leukemia, and the father decides to join the generations by reaching out to the others' sons who would have been Nathaniel's teammates. A strange boy shows up, a mute, a marvelous hitter, his origins and motives unexplained. There is a mystery here which gets unravelled over the course of the novel; but the book lives in the believable, finely-observed furniture of the game, as in these remarks about the dead son's first baseman's mitt:

> Nathaniel's baseball glove had something called the Grip-Tite Pocket and Hold-Tite Straps, trademarked but essentially meaningless terms that did nothing but teach my son to spell the word "tight" incorrectly . . . It was a more sophisticated tool than the glove I had used growing up, just as my glove had more bells and

[5] PAST THE BLEACHERS, by *Christopher A. Bohjalian*. Carroll & Graf. $18.95. BLUE GRASS, by *Sandra Tyler*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $19.95.

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> whistles than my father's. Nathaniel's mitt had a specifically designed hole for his index finger, and webbing that seemed to grow from the glove's fingers, rather than being simply stitched to them . . . it looked as long and round as a small animal. A barn cat, perhaps, or a raccoon. It was red, relatively common among boys today, but unheard of when I was a child. When I was a child baseball gloves were the color of rawhide, either tan or brown.

This was just one of many moments that brought satisfaction with things described as they are (brown or red) or as they well might be (a barn cat, a raccoon). Recently we've heard a bit too much about baseball in too many books, but *Past the Bleachers* is honest prose that has its eye on the ball.

By all odds the quietest novel of the quarter is Sandra Tyler's first one about the coming of age of a young woman. Telling her story in the first person, Leslie observes her parents growing apart—the father finally moves out—and is torn by the demands for love and affection her mother increasingly makes on her. The novel is fairly episodic: scenes with grandparents, aunt and uncle, boyfriends, succeed one another without much sense of necessity or inevitability. But Tyler is a real writer and she does it without tricks, rendering things and sensations as no more than what they are. The rather toneless calm of her narrative could be boring, but to my ears sounded refreshingly undesigning. It's a hard book to quote from—no purple passages—but here are some sentences comparing the heroine's aunt with her mother:

> My aunt swam the sidestroke leisurely back to shore. She looked like my mother, tall and hipless, stalklike, but carried herself heavily as if leading a parade. My mother moved more lightly, and would sometimes be mistaken for having been a ballet dancer. They had the same needle-straight black hair that glistened with gray like new tar, even though Aunt Holly had hers cropped above her ears. They both had knobby elbows and wore their watches loosely like bracelets, my aunt's a waterproof one that looked like a compass. My mother's had a silver band and the face was as small as a dime. But while my aunt's eyes were a deep brown, my mother's were an olive-green. In the sun they shone like the golden light in aquariums.

The "stalklike" figures, the "needle-straight" hair like "new tar," the carefully noted difference in their similarly worn watches—to write this way constitutes more of an achievement than it may seem. The engaging purity of Tyler's writing makes her debut as a novelist a gratifying one.

Two collections of stories by undervalued writers: Robert Phillips

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and Theodore Weesner.[6] Some years back Mr. Phillips published a book of poems (*Running on Empty*, 1981) containing a twelve-part sequence, "Ninety Miles from Nowhere," a sort of unanguished version of Lowell's "Life Studies" in which the narrator writes about the persons, places, and events of his childhood in a small town in Delaware. Now he has brought out a sequence of stories—sometimes hardly more than snapshots—in which these materials are further explored. *Winesburg, Ohio* is I suppose the model, but Phillips is a good deal more relaxed and more humorous than Sherwood Anderson, while his affection for Public Landing—the town of the book's title—is evident. As it is in the poems, Phillips' style is unpretentious and direct, concerned with getting down the remembered look and feel of things, rather than building elaborate sentences. There is an engaging freshness about the presentation, as in the inside of Bob Hollins' small grocery store:

> It smelled of fresh-roasted coffee beans and pickles in brine. There were barrels of cookies and peanuts in their shells . . . There was clean sawdust on the floor and a resident cat named Kayo. Mr. Hollins cut his meat in the back room. He wrapped none of his fruit in plastic, waxed none of his vegetables. He charged more than the supermarket, Billy's parents said, but they understood. His was an independent store, and a convenience store.

The point of this little ten-page story, "The 25¢ Paper Bag," is that the boy, Billy, asks Bob Hollins for a paper bag out of which he plans to make a Halloween mask. The boy lays down a quarter on the counter, expecting that the storekeeper will of course refuse it; but Bob Hollins lets it lie there and Billy is ashamed to retrieve it. He then goes home, tells his parents he was charged a quarter (not strictly true) for the bag, and his father successfully makes the storekeeper's life difficult by raising his rent and forcing him out of the premises. The story is tellingly delivered, from the ironic bite of its final line right down to the signs for Salada Tea and Red Man Chewing Tobacco that denote a certain decrepitness in the old building to which Hollins has to move. Robert Phillips' work has the unobtrusiveness of authenticity.

Theodore Weesner has published two major novels, *The Car Thief* (1972) and *The True Detective* (1986), that are still not well-enough known or admired. More recently he gave us *Winning the City* (1990), a comparatively minor but agreeable tale about a fifteen-year-old basketball player. *Children's Hearts* consists of eight stories, most of which feel as if we've encountered them before. As indeed we have to an extent, since their events—a boy living with his alcoholic father, trying to lead his own life, visiting his brother and mother who live

[6] PUBLIC LANDING REVISITED, by *Robert Phillips*. Story Line Press. $21.95. CHILDREN'S HEARTS, by *Theodore Weesner*. Summit Books. $19.00.

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elsewhere, playing basketball, driving a car—have occurred in two of the novels. In perhaps the most moving of these pieces, "Driver's Ed," a father, Glenn, and his thirteen-year-old son Dusty go on a pilgrimage to find the hitherto unvisited grave of Glenn's father, a suicide. The locale is Detroit, as in *The Car Thief*, and it is the car thief grown up, trying to explain to his son about how you can love a father who loves you and who most of the time is drunk. They never find the gravestone, but as they proceed back to their rented Buick Regal, parked on a dirt road in the cemetery, Glenn tells Dusty to take the wheel and to toot the horn once in farewell to his grandfather. The story ends with this paragraph:

> And as they roll along, as they traverse and climb the broad slope, he entrusts all, turns over all to his son, this young boy he loves, imagines himself back at the foot of the hill watching the car move in pursuit of the ongoing intersection of things. And when the toot of the horn is given and calls out over the quiet slope of old lives, he takes it in, and it is reassuring to hear, it allows a glimpse, the heart shiver, the voice after all that he had been waiting to hear, as the two of them, the three of them, roll along the narrow road.

This is the sort of moment one sometimes encounters in Weesner, compared to which most other writers sound a bit thin and shrill.

For some reason I've failed to read Penelope Fitzgerald, thus know her only by the latest.[7] It is a delightful entertainment, set in 1912 in a mythical Cambridge college, St. Angelicus, where Fred Fairly is a junior fellow, and in London, where Daisy Saunders is a nurse at Blackfriars Hospital. The novel charts their meeting, separation, and coming together again; but its real interest is the offbeat sensibility of Penelope Fitzgerald who ranks right up there with the eccentric English fictionists of this century. The time period is perfect Ivy Compton-Burnett; the dialogue sometimes sounds straight out of Evelyn Waugh, as when Fred visits his family at the Rectory (by train to Blow Halt with a stop at Bishop's Leaze), is greeted by two dogs named Sandford and Merton, and embraced by his little sister Julia:

> "Is there anything to eat?" Fred asked.
> "There's some rook pie and sago pudding left over for tonight. They're very nasty, but you remember that we're poor and have to eat nasty things."

One recalls William Boot's ancestral home at Boot Magna (nearest rail stop, Boot Magna Halt) and its collection of lovable antiquities in Waugh's *Scoop*. Fitzgerald is a performer: when Daisy tries to convince the wife of a Cambridge scholar named Wrayburn to take her on as

[7] THE GATES OF ANGELS, by *Penelope Fitzgerald*. Doubleday. $19.00.

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hired help, Mrs. Wrayburn (who spent four action-packed years at Newnham) looks down at the sink, "loaded down with all that was necessary when a husband had his daily meals at the house":

> Like most of her friends, she had prayed not to marry a clergyman, a general practitioner, or a university lecturer without a fellowship. All these (unlike the Army or the Bar) were professions that meant luncheon at home, so that every day (in addition to cups, plates and dishes) demanded toast-racks, egg-cups, egg-cosies, hot water jugs, hot milk strainers, tea-strainers, coffee-strainers, bone egg-spoons, sugar-tongs, mustard pots manufactured of blue glass inside . . .

It continues for thirty-five or more items without which luncheon is inconceivable, concluding with "compotiers, ramekins, pipkins, cruets, pots," most of which items we assume are "in the sink at the moment, waiting, in mute reproach, to be washed and dried." You get the picture: an essential English wit.

Earlier mention of Terry Southern may remind us that we haven't heard so much as a peep out of "the most profoundly witty writer of our generation" (Gore Vidal) in the twenty-two years since he published *Blue Movie*. My own experience of this slender unwholesome talent began when I picked up Southern's first novel, *Flash and Filigree*, and came across a takeoff of the beloved old TV show "What's My Line." Southern's show is called "What's My Disease," and when the patient is finally revealed to be suffering from, say, elephantiasis, the audience bursts into thunderous applause. Southern went on, in *The Magic Christian* and *Candy*, to produce two classics of what used to be called Black Humor; then, as if in recognition that the 1960s had closed down, he fell silent. In fact the new novel is not exactly new, since substantial chunks of it have been published, in slightly different form, in his collection of short pieces *Red Dirt Marijuana* (1967).[8] But episodic as it is, *Texas Summer* is a lovely piece of writing: clean, vividly evoking the "red dirt" Texas where Southern grew up, and strongly delineating the relationship between a twelve-year-old boy and the black ranch hand with whom he works and talks. It is the most un-Terry Southernlike of books, a small, finely made object in the post-Twain, post-Hemingway tradition of American prose. In the best sense of the phrase, a boy's book.

Caryl Phillips' novel is short but dense and needs to be read a second time before the full beauty of its design is apparent.[9] *Cambridge* consists mainly of two narratives: the longer one by Emily Cartwright, an Englishwoman who is visiting her father's sugar plantation in the West Indies; the shorter by a black slave, Cambridge (this name

[8] TEXAS SUMMER, by *Terry Southern*. Arcade Publishing/Little, Brown and Co. $17.95.

[9] CAMBRIDGE, by *Caryl Phillips*. Alfred A. Knopf. $19.00.

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pressed upon him when he was brought to the Caribbean), about to be executed for the murder of the plantation's estate manager who has been revealed as the lover of Emily and father of her stillborn child. Mr. Phillips' own career as a man born in St. Kitts, growing up in Leeds, educated at Oxford, traveling widely, is wholly relevant to the sense of place and of displacement in *Cambridge*. (He has written a very interesting memoir, *The European Tribe*, 1986, about his education and travels and his ambiguous relation to western civ.) But the really impressive thing about the new novel is the style he has concocted to express both Emily's leisurely, devoted, anthropological fascination with life in the tropics, and Cambridge's compressed, urgent account of the disruptions of a life that includes Africa, America, London, Warwickshire and the West Indies.

Although the time of the novel is early nineteenth century, the written style contrived for both characters reminded me of nothing so much as *Gulliver's Travels*, really an apt predecessor in many ways. Emily observes a "traditional West Indian dinner"

> where the table labored under a burden of ostentatious and substantial dishes. Gentlemen predominated numerically. Many brought with them their servants, some in livery, some not so, some with shoes, some barefoot, but all truly exemplified the type of the unprepossessing negro. They buzzed and swarmed around us like flies, and the lack of any formal arrangement among them created a vast disorder—excepting, of course, the arrangement whereby they might attempt to steal from beneath our very gaze whatever might be carried off.

Like Gulliver in Books I and II, Emily tries hard, means well, is comparatively "enlightened"; also, like Gulliver and the rest of us, she is trapped within the limits of her perceptions and the language available to express them. Cambridge's style is more like Gulliver's in Book IV, caught between the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos, increasingly isolated the more he tries to speak and act humanly. Cambridge's final words to the reader assert that his only interest has been to speak the truth in the service of the Christian faith to which he was converted: "Praise be the Lord! He who 'hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth'." The bitter irony of such idealistic talk about "blood" is fully apparent by now to the reader, since at the end of the novel the main characters have been as effectively killed off as the heroes and villains of a Jacobean tragedy. There is indeed a tragic quality to *Cambridge*, but it's leavened and qualified by the power, and sometimes the beauty, of its language of enlightenment, of the Enlightenment. It is an impressive instance of what a remarkably individual talent can achieve because of, not despite, tradition—in fact, because of traditions.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Making Sense of What Takes Place

"I KNOW OF ALMOST NO PLEASURE greater than having a piece of fiction draw together disparate incidents so that they relate to one another and confirm that feeling that life itself is a creative process," John Cheever wrote in one of his letters; "that one thing is put purposefully upon another, that what is lost in one encounter is replenished in the rest, and that we possess some power to make sense of what takes place." The best of the following works of fiction accomplish just that, and when a novel or story fails, it often may be because the writer failed to "make sense of what takes place." The reader is left with inconclusive evidence.

William Maxwell's first collection of stories, *Over By the River* (1977) contained twelve stories, half set in or near New York City, half set in the small town of "Draperville, Illinois." Now fifteen years later, Maxwell gives us a volume of seven interconnected stories set in his native town of Lincoln, Illinois in the early years of this century.[1] The stories are quietly contemplative and deal with large questions of self-knowledge and responsibility. The book's finest achievement is "The Holy Terror," ostensibly the narration of a younger brother about his older brother. But the title also refers to the narrator himself, as suggested by his psychiatrist's remark that the terrible accident which had befallen his brother—the amputation of a leg at the age of five—had also been a great misfortune for him as well. It had made him, against his true nature, become a more retiring person. Inside he was more of a terror than he ever allowed himself to be, and therefore he was constantly at war with himself.

The story's central theme, however, is the burden of guilt one carries about a relative when one knows something the other does not. The younger brother eventually is told what his parents always have known, that the leg need not have been amputated. The fracture could have been set, but a bumbling doctor failed to do so and gangrene set in. For the rest of his life this athletic older brother had to compensate for his loss of a limb, while his more retiring, nonathletic brother felt guilty about remaining whole. The brother's nickname, Hap, perhaps is symbolic of the role accident or chance plays in all our lives.

"Love" is the briefest tale, an anecdote really, of an entire fifth

[1] BILLIE DYER AND OTHER STORIES, by *William Maxwell.* Alfred A. Knopf. $18.00.

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grade class's infatuation with their pretty and kind young teacher. Her decline and death from tuberculosis is prefigured by the symbol of a huge bright circus poster which the narrator loves. No matter how many times he tries, he cannot take all the poster in, and finally it deteriorates: "In the summertime, riding in the back seat of my father's open Chalmers, I used to crane my neck as we passed that turn, hoping to see every last tiger and flying trapeze artist, but it was never possible. The poster was weather-beaten now, with loose strips of paper hanging down." The poster and the dying teacher become one.

"With Reference to an Incident at a Bridge" is another slight tale concerning an act of cruelty, early in life, which makes a boy realize that he is not to be trusted. "My Father's Friends" concerns appearance versus reality in one's relationships. "The Front and the Back Parts of the House" can stand with "The Holy Terror" as one of the collection's most notable tales. Here Maxwell's protagonist works his way toward an understanding of why an aged black domestic who had served his family for years would rebuff him and show anger upon his return home. The woman mistakenly believed that two characters in one of the narrator's novels—a morally loose woman, by her standards, and a man with a criminal record and a vicious nature—were based on her and her husband. In fact, one of the characters was a composite and the other wholly imaginary. In a wonderfully epigrammatic phrase, Maxwell concludes, "If you turn the imagination loose like a hunting dog, it will often return with the bird in its mouth." The story is about nothing less than the relationship between life and art.

Finally, the title story "Billie Dyer" is a pastiche of clippings, narrative, and memory—almost not a short story at all. It brings to mind the technique of Maxwell's 1980 novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, which was based upon memories and details taken from the newspaper files of the Illinois State Historical Library. It too was set in Lincoln. "Billie Dyer" concerns a young black who took thirteen years from the time he was graduated from high school until he completed his medical internship and eventually became a prominent doctor. Among other things the story is about the plight of the educated black in America, uncomfortable at times with members of his own race with whom he has grown to have little in common, yet not accepted by whites whose tastes and interests he shares. The story is also about the responsibility and consequences of being a forerunner for one's race in any profession. Billie Dyer literally works himself to death, and hence the irony of his surname.

Until now William Maxwell has been thought of primarily as a novelist, critic and editor. At least three pieces in this late collection reveal him to be a master of the short story as well, stories written in prose that resonates and hurts.

It may surprise the followers of Harry Crews to hear that his twelfth

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novel is a love story that is both life-affirming and tender.[2] Harry Crews? The man who wrote novels about karate black belts, professional body builders, and a man who ate an entire automobile? Right, that Harry Crews. When he puts a drifter named Peter Butcher in a Florida boarding house across the street from one Sarah Leemer, a terrified and confused beauty, the complications and rewards of true love begin.

This is, to be sure, no ordinary love story, as its title would indicate. Along the way to the nuptial bed we encounter Peter's co-worker George, who is universally called "The Burnt Nigger" because he had been branded by his woman across his back from shoulder to shoulder; George's woman, Linga, a giant Jamaican Rastafarian whose face is decorated with razor scars; Max Winekoff, an eighty-five-year-old gossip who constantly is bending double and placing his hands flat on the floor; Gertrude Leemer, Sarah's mother, who keeps her late husband's skull stuck on top of her bedpost; and Jonathan Butcher, Pete's younger brother, who has been reduced to a slobbering defective due to an accident imposed by Pete. Not your ordinary cast of characters. The reason Pete is rootless is his intense sense of guilt over his brother's tragedy and the destruction of his family. His surname is symbolic: Pete feels himself to be the butcher of all those around him. He feels he has placed a curse upon his life.

The better part of *Scar Lover* is devoted to Sarah's attempts to restore Pete's self-esteem after first conquering her own fears. The lump she has discovered in her breast turns out to be only a benign fibroid cyst. She has been living in fear she would be rendered breastless, like her mother. Through patience and love, she teaches her lover that "Being Pete Butcher was more than all right, it was pretty damn fine. He was worth something after all."

Crews seems to be saying throughout, How curious is man, there is just no end to the bad things that can happen to him in life. Therefore, we should cleave together as best we can, and ease one another's burdens. In the story of Pete and Sarah, Crews has created a comic morality play which is less fierce and more tender than any of his previous works.

"Long Dong Silver," an actor in a pornographic film, played an important role in the recent public confirmation hearings of Justice Clarence Thomas. It was shocking—even in America of the 1990s—to hear in public a discussion about the generosity of a man's genitalia. Yet Fay Weldon, born in New Zealand and now living in London and Somerset, has based her sixteenth novel upon (to quote the dust jacket), "a very vital ten inches belonging to one Leslie Beck, aka Leslie the Magnificent."[3] The novel concerns sexual pleasure, especially how Long Dong Leslie bestowed it upon four female friends:

[2] SCAR LOVER, by *Harry Crews*. Poseidon Press. $19.00.
[3] LIFE FORCE, by *Fay Weldon*. Viking Penguin. $21.00.

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Nora, Marion, Rosalie, and Susan—and the havoc he provokes when he returns to rekindle old rivalries and infidelities. The "life force" of the title is of course Leslie's cock, or dong, or dick, or willy (it gets called all of these, and more, during the novel's course [or coarse]). The object of desire, alas, has somewhat shrunken when Beck reappears, a sixty-ish widower in search of new relationships.

Leslie Beck is an interesting character, cocky even in middle age. (One cannot help but speculate if the size of one's genitalia contributes to the size of one's ego?) Beck is a real estate developer out of his league in the world of London art galleries and publishing houses. But the quartet of ladies with whom he has affairs are rather flat, cartoonlike characters—the sit-by-the-fire spinster who lives alone with cats, the housewife couch potato who watches TV and eats fish and chips with her children, and so on. Even the omnipresent subject of sex is rendered in an acutely boring fashion. Every act is consummated in the missionary position; even a ten-inch "willy" has its limits, given such a scenario.

Moreover, Weldon has chosen to narrate the novel as Nora's autobiography, with awkward results, as the following passage illustrates:

> Reader, if you can at this tense moment bear to leave these hot, dreamy, wine-soaked, garlic- and olive-oil-drenched salad days for a little, I'll take you back to the wet, cold Norfolk afternoon when Ed first met Marion and brought her home to Bramley Terrace . . .

A little bit of such zig-zagging chronology goes a long way toward unsettling the reader.

But for all its inadequacies of characterization, this new novel does end well. Plot elements begin to be resolved neatly—too neatly: A husband presumed dead returns, a cat presumed strayed is found in a closet, an awkward daughter makes the college hockey team . . . Then Nora admits she has abandoned writing autobiography for writing fiction—the latter was found to be easier and much more fun. Then she tells us what *really* happened in the real world—the husband actually is never heard from again, the cat is lost forever, etc. It is a trick on the reader, but a good trick. It works the way the brilliant denouement of William Maxwell's *The Chateau* works, when he advises the reader of all the misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and accidents which had guided the preceding hundreds of pages. Weldon's ending almost, but not quite, redeems her shallow, old-fashioned novel.

Sequels are rarely as fine as the original materials on which they are based. With the possible exceptions of *Through the Looking Glass* and The New Testament, I am hard put to name a succeeding volume which compared favorably with its predecessor. So it should not surprise that A. N. Wilson, in the third volume of his "Lampitt

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Papers" sequence, seems to have run out of steam.[4] What does surprise is just how empty the volume is. It is sad to see Wilson's gallery of actors, writers, rectors and squires limping toward such a feeble conclusion. One assumes that this volume ends the sequence, though in the final pages Wilson has left the door open for more; it is possible we will be given Julian Ramsey's affair with a Miss Nolan, the lead singer in "The Newnham Norms," a Cambridge undergraduate who travels in a van painted with psychedelic colors.

Miss Nolan, of course, represents the new England, and the Lampitts—all 19 of them mentioned in this volume—represent the old. The problem is that by volume three the reader, and presumably Wilson, is rather tired of the Lampitts. The author rehearses their family history and foibles over and over, including Uncle Roy's endless fascination with Lampitt lore, on the chance that the reader hasn't read the preceding two volumes. Wilson is not willing for the novel to stand on its own.

If Miss Nolan seems an unsubtle symbol, her appearance is nothing compared to that of Aldingbury Ring, an historical sacrificial site which is destroyed in the name of "progress" to enable the building of yet another highway. The digging up of the past at Aldingbury Ring parallels the efforts of one Albion Pugh, who explores a possible murder in the not-too-distant past.

This sounds more promising than it is. I was happy to praise volume two, *A Bottle in the Smoke*, in these pages in the Spring 1991 issue (Vol. XLIV, No. 1). And the initial volume, *Incline Our Hearts*, is better yet. But here Wilson drags in characters like the painter P. J. Pilbright, so lively in *Bottle*, merely for the sake of symmetry. Many of the characters converge at a party given by Mia Eggscliffe, described as "one of the last great hostesses." In the novel the party is an interminable bore. To be sure, there are moments when Wilson's wit breaks through, as when he discusses the visionary art of Blake where "the sublime stuff goes hand in hand with absolute balls"; when he observes that the coffin's disappearance through a hole in the wall at a crematorium reminds him of "the food hatch in the dining room at Seaforth Grange"; and when a headmaster makes a weary sound "which one of my school contemporaries once described as like that of 'an old sheep having an orgasm.'" Julian experiences one fine epiphany during the novel, when he comes to ask himself why he puts up with an unsatisfactory living arrangement, sharing a house with a cousin he only half-likes? (The answer, he realizes, is because in the back of his head he hoped things would "return to normal"—i.e., he would live again with Mummy and Daddy.) The novel also assays important themes like the barriers of class, the unbridgeable barrier of time, the destruction of old myths, and the "theory of conjunction

[4] DAUGHTERS OF ALBION, by *A.N. Wilson*. Viking Penguin. $21.00.

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of personal destinies." But Wilson does little with any of this. Perhaps it is time he left the Lampitts for fresh material.

Mona Simpson's *The Lost Father* is another example of what was said above about sequels.[5] Because it focuses almost exclusively upon the female protagonist, Mayan Stevenson, and her search for her missing father, the novel lacks the richness and texture of her preceding novel, *Anywhere But Here*, which alternated between Mayan, her crazy mother, and her earthy grandmother. That novel had three big characters to explore, and their differences fascinated.

The current novel focuses, relentlessly, upon Mayan's search. And while her mother and grandmother make cameo appearances, the long novel is seen through her perspective. This can, after a time, become wearying, particularly when certain of her thoughts are repeated. "All you have to do to become somebody's god is disappear," she tells us on page 38. Okay. But on page 444 we encounter these words: "Disappearing was all you had to do to become somebody's god." Whoops! Twice within the first five pages we are told the grandmother did not like the father. Twice we're told a patient with periocarditis is allowed just nine weeks in the hospital. We're also told twice that Mayan imagined her father taking her through someplace big, like a factory, a place that belonged to him; and we're told twice that all her family funerals were for women, mostly her grandmother's aunts. And while repetition of thought may be justified by Mayan's absolute obsession with her search, authorial repetition of exterior description cannot, as when the rubber band holding a young man's ponytail is described exactly like the one holding an older woman's; both, we are told, are the color of liver.

Part of Simpson's style is to posit little aphorisms throughout. These include,

> Absence has qualities, properties all its own,
> but no voice.

And,

> So much of what determined what was life and what dream
> was still only money.

Such phrases give the novel a heavy, didactic effect. Yet Simpson's early background as a poet also shows. The text is strewn with sharp images, as when the narrator describes her fifty-six-year-old mother as privately thinking, "She is a child holding an empty glass jar waiting for the sky to fill it . . . ," or when a victim of child molestation

[5] THE LOST FATHER, by *Mona Simpson*. Alfred A. Knopf. $22.00.

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describes her need for time and a room to herself as "like being inside a clean lung"; or when the protagonist describes her depression as "round and round like a[n] unthreaded screw in a socket." Later she describes her mental state as "like one small animal, alert but frightened, in a corner of a huge cave." This is striking writing.

And the novel itself is a success, despite its excesses. Someone once said of novelists that there are takers-out and there are putters-in. Mona Simpson is clearly a putter-in. She could use an alert editor to advise her when she has put in too much or too often. Like Thomas Wolfe, she writes novels that are rich and full as plum puddings. Ultimately we care about her Mayan Stevenson, we get caught up in her quest, and care deeply whether or not she succeeds in locating her father. That is the mark of a good novelist. In both her novels, Mayan Stevenson emerges as a vulnerable figure with whom all the rejected can identify.

Joseph Conrad's credo as fiction writer—"A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line"—applies to Robert Stone's work as well. His new novel is especially Conradian in the manner, through the written word, he convinces the reader that he or she is seeing, hearing, and feeling his scenes and characters.[6] In *Lord Jim*, Conrad spoke of "the meticulous precision of statement," for that alone can "bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things." Stone achieves such a precision. On every page of *Outerbridge Reach* he gives us the details necessary to believe his fiction. "That winter was the warmest in a hundred years," is the novel's first sentence, and immediately the reader begins to relate. Yes, it was, we say, and go on to encounter a falling stock market, polluted waters, further unnatural weather, in a world where nothing seems to work any more.

The hero is Owen Browne, an Annapolis graduate and Vietnam veteran, a former golden boy of whom the author says, "He and his friends had been the last good children of their time." After them came the hippies, the flower children, the yuppies, the dinks . . . And that is part of the reason for Browne's discontent. His moment never seems to have come. The beginning of the novel finds him fortysomething, married to the same woman for twenty years, and the father of an insolent teenage daughter. He is resigned to his private unrest. He feels a personal failure in a homeland which fails to function as a community or cause, a land pervaded by the spirit of No Can Do. The rat-infested marshes of Outerbridge Reach seem to symbolize these failures: "He remembered scraps of the place's history. Thousands of immigrants had died there, in shanties, of cholera, in winter far from home. It had been a place of loneliness, violence, and terrible labor . . ."

[6] OUTERBRIDGE REACH, by *Robert Stone*. Ticknor & Fields. $21.95.

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The novel revolves about a triangle and a challenge. The triangle involves Browne, the honorable honest man, his wife, and Ron Strickland, a dishonorable and dishonest filmmaker who exploits others and would push his grandmother down a flight of stairs if he thought it would make a good sequence on film. The challenge occurs when Browne agrees to participate in a solo circumnavigation race for which he is inadequately skilled and prepared, having only once sailed alone from West Palm Beach to North Carolina. That time he had suffered both fatigue and hallucinations. Yet Browne accepts the challenge, seeing it as an opportunity to get a hold on his life, to accomplish something visible and solid.

The novel breaks neatly into two halves, before the race and during the race. The chapters alternate between the Brownes and Strickland. The scene and mood shift from highly civilized Connecticut and Manhattan to the elemental world of the sea. Once underway, Browne has close calls with an enormous shark, a plague of insects, and floating icebergs. His problems become almost mythical, while the sailboat on which he has staked his life turns out to be jerrybuilt: "He was riding a decomposing piece of plastic through an Antarctic storm."

Stone brings to bear numerous literary allusions to illuminate Browne's plight. Among them are quotations from Shakespeare, Marlowe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Hart Crane, and of course Melville. For the jacket and title page, the publishers have chosen a Rockwell Kent nautical illustration, *Hail and Farewell*, and it is highly appropriate, since so many of my generation first read *Moby Dick* in the Modern Library Giant edition filled with Kent's woodcuts. Like Melville's great novel, Stone's also employs the sea as his image of reality, which ultimately is ungraspable. Like *Moby Dick*, *Outerbridge Reach* is a parable on life and existence, with emphasis on all that eludes and crushes the human spirit, all that is out of reach. Both Ahab and Browne become mad in their pursuits. Just as Pip counsels Ahab, the ghost of Browne's father advises him.

It has been written by Dominic Loehnis in *The New York Observer* (May 25, 1992), that Stone's novel not only echoes Conrad and Melville, but also "commands greater comparison with a book called *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*, an account of an around-the-world yachtsman who disappeared in 1969. It was written by two British journalists, the late Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall . . ." The acknowledgments page of Stone's novel bears the statement, "An episode in the book was suggested by an incident that actually occurred during a circumnavigation race in the mid-60s. This novel is not a reflection on that incident but a fiction referring to the present day." Loehnis and Ron Hall would have us believe there are more parallels between the two books than "an episode" or "an incident." And 1969 is not the "mid-60s." Whatever its sources and inspirations (and they may not matter), *Outerbridge Reach* is a compelling novel attempting to make sense of what takes place in a world out of control.

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HAROLD FROMM

Deconstructing Literary History

WHEN DAVID PERKINS' *A HISTORY OF MODERN POETRY* APPEARED in two volumes, the first in 1976 and the second in 1987, it seemed like a pretty monumental achievement, and when I wrote about it soon after its completion, I marveled at how Perkins had successfully managed to avoid introducing more than the most minimal references to literary theory and theoreticians at a time when theory was sovereign. "He doesn't even invoke most of their names. (Can you believe a book without Derrida in the index? No Foucault or Althusser? No Bakhtin? Not even a little aerie for Terry Eagleton?) Has he even read them? Most likely, for he seems to have read everything; or else he's an even greater virtuoso than he appears to be."[1] The virtuosity and good sense that enabled Perkins to avoid messing up his eminently readable history with potted discussions of literary theory were apparently responsible for postponing it all for this compressed little book devoted *entirely* to theories. And if the new book is not *quite* as readable as the earlier one, it's readable enough for all that.[2] (As a matter of fact, it came as a relief after I had just tried unsuccessfully to read "Critical Multiculturalism" by the Chicago Cultural Studies Group in the Spring 1992 issue of *Critical Inquiry*—a voluble farrago of corporate theoretical jargon that made the "death of the author" seem believable as never before.)

Although Perkins' book is called *Is Literary History Possible?* it could as well have been called "Is Representation Possible?" or even, perhaps, "Is Knowledge Possible?" though admittedly these would conceal its literary theme. As an extremely skeptical author open to new ideas and the questions they raise but closed to "definitive" answers, Perkins takes us on a tour of the theories that have prevailed since the birth of modern literary history in the nineteenth century but tells us right from the start that he does not think true (i.e., accurate, veracious) literary history can be written, even though he himself had done such an exemplary job with modern poetry. (But "exemplary," according to him, is not synonymous with "true.") There are a number of reasons: a history must be written from a

[1] Harold Fromm, "If a Poem Is Like a Picture, What's a History of Poetry Like?" *Poetry*, December 1987, p. 297.

[2] IS LITERARY HISTORY POSSIBLE?, by *David Perkins*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $25.95.

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limited point of view, it involves selection from what is known about the past, and it implies that the past had a determinate being, an assumption that Perkins regards as "very questionable." What is known about the past is inherently spotty and could never, even in theory, be "complete," since one can't know everything about anything. Furthermore, the past is not any "thing" at all; rather, it is an unrecapturable flux of infinite quantities and qualities that keep changing as new categories of thinking and knowing are applied to it. Thus, for example, contemporary studies can talk about past events with an awareness of misogyny, homophobia, racism, and colonialism that was unavailable to the people who experienced them, events that must have felt quite different from our imaginings. Yet even though the past keeps being created anew, the patterns we ascribe to it can be said to have been there all along, in the sense of a potentiality for future interpretations. Since one cannot represent the present any more definitively than one can represent the past, because the same kind of selection, hypostatization, and limiting point of view are involved, there is no reason to suppose that the presence of the present confers any overwhelmingly superior foundations for our knowing it. Thus, representing literary history is more or less like representing everything else—ad hoc, provisional, "interested," a selection and projection, rather than a re-presentation of a thing-in-itself. "The question, then, of whether literary history is possible is really whether any construction of a literary past can meet our present criteria of plausibility. Finally, we cannot answer with a yes or no. A judgment of *more* or *less* is required."

What ultimately determines the character of any given literary history, according to Perkins, are the necessities of the rhetoric involved in writing it. Perkins finds two predominant "rhetorics" of literary historiography, the narrative and the encyclopedic. Narrative history provides a plot and point of view, selecting details from infinite possibilities and supplying (i.e., manufacturing) coherence and continuity from what are discrete and disconnected events or utterances. Concepts like the emergence of the middle class or the popularity of films are used to explain the rise and fall of the novel, with all the detracting richness of history's flux being swept aside in order to foreground the organizing principle. An entire chapter—"The Construction of English Romantic Poetry as a Literary Classification"—illustrates the fairly arbitrary choices and developments that result in an eventually canonical "story." One such story is about the genesis of romanticism from effects of the French Revolution, while a rival version finds its genesis in an aesthetic revolt against neoclassicism. Although a number of romantic poets regarded themselves as a "group" for one reason or another, the recognized members of the group varied according to the differing criteria of the critics who called them romantic. Were they related because of their connection with the French Revolution, the Lake District, a return to medieval-

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ism, a resistance to neoclassical poetic diction? Whatever their connection, no indisputably shared essence can be found that links them all together. The "story," whether it depends on *Geist*, tempers of the times, world-historicalness, periods, schools, movements, genres, traditions, or any other supra-personal entities, is finally only a story, with greater or lesser plausibility but no irresistible claim to capturing "reality."

To give one example, today's narrative histories include chapters or themes about women writers or black writers that were missing from earlier accounts. In some cases, this inclusion corrects earlier exclusions by revealing how much activity there really was among writers who were considered marginal; in other cases, like the recent *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, the inclusion of a treatment of "Women Poets" strikes Perkins as mostly political or ideological, because there are very few surviving poems by Greek and Roman women writers. The alteration in the treatment of Bloomsbury writers over the past thirty years, to provide another example, is fairly sensational (Virginia Woolf herself has metamorphosed from a precious patrician to a Marxist-feminist—at least if Jane Marcus can be believed), while several scholars have recently pointed out that Laura Riding, for all her importance to literary modernism, is given very short shrift in today's histories and anthologies because of her hostile non-cooperation with the feminists and deconstructionists who are writing the histories and anthologizing the poems.

After giving his own narrative account of the development of English romantic poetry as a classification (in order to show how incohesive it really is), Perkins underscores his prevailing skepticism by applying it to himself: "Since this chapter has presented a narrative literary history, it is necessary, in a book of this kind, to reflect critically on this construction. If it tells a true story, it does not support the argument of this book, for the argument is that a true story cannot be told." Despite this doubt, Perkins feels that the alternative is not pure chaos: many literary classifications are supported by the views of their participants about their own work, as well as by the people who read them, and by successive generations of readers. "When a classification fulfills these criteria of referring to a group that felt itself to be a group, was effective in history as a group, and created what seems to us a genuine synthesis of works, it is as valid as a literary classification can be," which for him means only somewhat valid, but good enough.

The alternative to narrative literary history is what Perkins calls "The Postmodern Encyclopedia," a genre gaining favor because of contemporary diffidence about totalizing claims. The 1987 *Columbia Literary History of the United States* and the 1989 *A New History of French Literature* are offered as typifying examples whose implicit goal is somehow to outwit the discontinuity and disruption of Western life today, a discontinuity that makes traditional narratives unbelievable

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in virtue of their neatness and coherence. Instead of a unifying authorial sensibility (the "self" that some people regard as a myth), the producers of "histories" like these evade the whole problem by parceling out chapters—actually, independent essays—to a great variety of specialist authorities who do their own thing without any attempt at achieving harmony or consensus with their co-authors. The result is a salmagundi of themes and foci, often expressing contradictory points of view or antithetical notions of what constitutes "the facts." Just a glance at a mini-version of this genre on the bookshelf by my side—*Reconstructing American Literary History* (1986), edited by Sacvan Bercovitch—tells the story, for here are essays about "Strategies of Control in the Literature of the Founding Fathers," "Popular Fiction and Critical Values," "*Benito Cereno* and New World Slavery," "The American Sexual Poetics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson," "On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism." From this volume alone a reader in 2020 would probably derive a pretty good sense of the obsessive interests of fin-de-siècle intellectuals. And no historian (except for the editor) will have to suffer a bum rap for distorting the "story" of twentieth-century American literary history, because no story is being told. But, one is forced to ask, is this genre really history at all, or just misnamed collections of essays?

In our present "political" climate, a favorite methodology seems to be narrative literary history that sets into historical context some area, theme, or genre singled out for explanation because of current ideology. Although such contextualizing is widespread among Marxist, feminist, African-American, and other specialist scholars, an insuperable problem is that the choice of what qualifies as a context is itself an act of selection and interpretation, rather than a foundational given. Is the real context of "The Charge of the Light Brigade," asks Perkins, "the contemporary newspaper reports of the charge at Balaklava" or is it "the traditions and conventions of heroic war poems, going as far back as the *Iliad*"? He discusses at length the limitations in this regard of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, finding particular grounds for objection in their downplay of literary genres, traditions, and conventions.

> *The Madwoman in the Attic* reveals something that is generally true, mutatis mutandis, of all contextual literary histories. The contextualizing is, in a sense, bogus. The ideas by which the literary works are explained and interpreted are not derived from the contexts or the texts so much as they are imposed upon them. . . . The ideas that Gilbert and Gubar apply in performing [their] constructions concern the psychic responses of women writers to social circumstances. This set of assumptions constitutes the critical machine that is created prior to reading the texts and is then driven over the texts and the contexts too.

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Speaking of their "insensitivity and ruthlessness" in handling texts, Perkins balks at the fact that "both formal and ideological considerations lead Gilbert and Gubar to find madwomen among the characters in narratives by women." Obliged to find madwomen everywhere in order to give their book coherence and persuasiveness, they assume "that all nineteenth-century women harbored these emotions. Consequently, a madwoman must be produced [even] in the last chapter, on Emily Dickinson, and that she did not write narratives is no obstacle." The solution is for the authors to conclude that "Emily Dickinson herself became a madwoman." Though Perkins raises similar objections to the arbitrariness and circular reasoning found in Stephen Greenblatt's new historicist essays and Alan Liu's social/political investigations of Wordworth, not even more immanent and formalist theories of literary change escape his skeptical scrutiny, for he sees them as "normative" instructions for readers rather than accurate descriptions of the formal realities behind texts.

After so much rejection of sureties and absolutes, Perkins concludes his book with a chapter on "The Functions of Literary History." Though a "relativizing historian," he is nonetheless able to say that literary history is in reality a form of literary criticism and its role is to subserve "the appreciation of literature. The function of literary history lies partly in its impact on reading. We write literary history because we want to explain, understand, and enjoy literary works." Yet there are contradictions even here: literary history engages us in a dialogue with the past by attempting to reconstruct a distant mentality and context, but at the same time, the stories about the past are more or less "fictions." While they alienate us from the works we read by making it difficult to respond with subjective immediacy because of the strangeness of distant cultures, at the same time they project our own political and psychological interests upon other people who probably didn't share them. These contradictions, however, do not prevent Perkins from concluding that "a purpose of teaching in the humanities, it is usually said, is to keep the past alive, to make it part of a present consciousness. If we ask why this is desirable, one answer is that we do not want to be prisoners of the present." And yet the present is always indeed present, reshaping the past into our own images even as it "defamiliarizes" the past we are creating by emphasizing its otherness. Current musicology has faced the same dilemma in its production of the early music movement: are the performances of Bach and Vivaldi by Christopher Hogwood or John Eliot Gardiner accurate representations of what eighteenth-century audiences might have heard or, marvelous as they sound to our own ears, are they really little more than imaginative fabrications, as many people insist?

In the final analysis, Perkins is unable to resolve the dilemmas he raises, because they seem inherently insoluble. Although his account of the inner contradictions of "representation" retraces familiar

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philosophical ground, his book provides a genial, learned, and accessible overview of the classical problem of the relationship between thinking and being, thought and reality, knowing and truth, especially in its application to reading and understanding literature. It shines a cool light on the overheated literary politics of today's intelligentsia, offering useful insights into the rationales underlying the wars about the canon. And its stance of sympathetic skepticism seems exactly right as a counter to the curious amalgam of postmodern nihilism and reactionary (but not just right-wing) true-believerism that dominates our cultural life.

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GEORGE CORE

James McConkey and the Calculus of Fact

ALTHOUGH JAMES MCCONKEY IS KNOWN CHIEFLY AS A NOVELIST and short-story writer, his work depends far more than that of most fictionists upon fact, fact both experienced directly and recovered through memory or re-created through reading and reflection. His novel derived from Chekhov's life, *To a Distant Island*, is one example of how his imagination works; there are many others—for instance, the leading piece in *Night Stand: A Book of Stories*, "An Essay on a Premonition and Eight Heads," reappears in his memoir *Court of Memory*. "An Essay" is followed immediately in *Night Stand* by "Witches of Love," which is as obviously a work of fiction as the other piece is a personal essay in reminiscence and meditation, just as its title tells us. So the case is complicated but by no means unique or even singular in the last decade and more, which is the Age of the Essay.

The personal essay is flourishing today while its critical counterpart is often falling into desuetude, for criticism as it has been practiced lately is often written by people whose sense of style and language is defective. The deconstructionists are as casual about the majesty of the language as they are about the meaning and measure of literature, which they are busily unmaking. In stark contrast the real writers of our time have often turned away from criticism to the making of literature itself. My reflections are prompted in part by the career of James McConkey, who began his professional academic life with a dissertation on E. M. Forster that became a well-regarded book. Then he turned to the writing of fiction and of reminiscence. This, in an unnatural time, is a natural and healthy response to critical impulses careening out of control, but one that I would guess has been in his career more nearly unconscious than conscious. Having gotten his Ph.D. in the usual way, McConkey returned to his real love; he should also be commended for turning his back on journalism as well; and fortunately for the readers of this world the administrators at Cornell University were not only wise enough to hire him but enlightened enough to let him explore his sensibility in his own ways. That Cornell is E. B. White's university is wonderfully appropriate.

White, together with James Thurber, Joseph Mitchell, A. J. Liebling, and others, forged the essay in this country for their time and the years since; and they expanded the limits of the essay by using

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many of the devices of fiction—character presented in the round, the scenic element (including exactly rendered dialogue), cumulative use of representative detail, extended metaphors or controlling images, time shifts, and even occasionally the rudiments of plot. Anyone who does not believe me should repair to White's selected essays or *The Most of A. J. Liebling* or Mitchell's *The Bottom of the Harbor*. That McConkey, a contributor to *The New Yorker* and to various leading American quarterlies, especially this one, has done his homework in this connection is obvious. Without the example of this generation of writers his work would be no more possible than that of *The New Yorker*'s leading writer of nonfiction—John McPhee.

Our critical lexicon and taxonomy unfortunately do not contain a satisfactory term for the extended work of nonfiction that isn't pure autobiography but that partakes of autobiography. We have such dismal terms as *creative nonfiction*, which are less inviting than a hanging or a bearbaiting and much less colorful and lively.

This brings us to Mr. McConkey's new book, *Rowan's Progress*, which encompasses history, biography, autobiography, and a good deal more.[1] The author, who in the 1950s put in a six-year stint at Morehead College in eastern Kentucky, was drawn back to Rowan County and the college and their tangled history, and *Rowan's Progress* has resulted. The protagonist of the series of stories that unfold is usually C. Louise Caudill, M.D., a general practitioner who treated McConkey and his wife and their two sons together with everyone else in the community and its outlying areas until a hospital was finally established in Morehead. That hospital was created largely through the intelligent and unflagging efforts of Dr. Caudill. The story of the hospital's creation unfortunately is not nearly so engaging as the story of Louise Caudill's life, which is also that of her family and her community; but the establishment of the hospital is the crown of that long and rich life.

In the course of this book McConkey attempts to give the reader a history of this part of Kentucky as well as biographical sketches of the leading figures in this history, especially Cora Wilson Stewart (who implacably fought illiteracy in Morehead and Rowan County) and Louise Caudill (who brought modern medicine to the same community). The author is more successful with biography than history, but one of the best sequences in the book is devoted to an account of the Rowan County war, which was a feud between the Martin and Tolliver families that nearly destroyed the community. Behind the conflict lay the usual motives of revenge—jealousy, greed, ignorance, hostility. Kentucky's dark and bloody ground has nurtured many such feuds, none of which is so compellingly told as the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud in *Huckleberry Finn* but all of which strike one as

[1] ROWAN'S PROGRESS, by *James McConkey*. Pantheon. $22.00.

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equally senseless and barbaric. Through her mother Dr. Caudill is related to the Tollivers, a dubious legacy but one that enables McConkey to begin his story proper after presenting a good but by no means brilliant account of the feud. Here, as elsewhere in *Rowan's Progress*, Mr. McConkey must rely upon local newspapers and histories that necessarily betray their origins and show what Cora Stewart was fighting against. The Louisville *Courier-Journal*'s account of the feud's bloody conclusion in June 1887 is written in far better prose than the Lexington *Herald-Leader*'s accounts of the hospital's founding in Morehead nearly a century later—evidence that the *Herald* and the *Leader* are far better newspapers to deliver (as I did in my salad days) than to read. (The *Leader* is now late and unlamented.)

The feud is an integral part of the history that McConkey has tried to sort out and then present. So long as that history directly concerns him or Dr. Caudill, or their friends and acquaintances, it remains engaging; but when it turns to the St. Claire Medical Center, the result is often heavy weather and heavy going. We learn more about garden-variety politics, theories of hospital administration, and other matters of bureaucracy and beadledom than we care to. So the story runs down badly in the last one hundred or so pages of the book because McConkey gets bogged down in mundane detail. Yes, there has been progress in Rowan County; but the author neglects the other side of his case—namely that the town of Morehead and Rowan County, while being better off than most of Appalachia and much of Kentucky, are still mired in narrow and ignorant ways that no hospital, no matter how technologically advanced and well staffed, can cure. Kentucky, despite the cultural sophistication of some areas in the Bluegrass and western part of the state, remains a bastion of illiteracy and ignorance rivaled by few states in the Union; and the college where McConkey once taught seldom rises to mediocrity.

James McConkey's profound commitment to writing this book remains puzzling to me. That commitment seems to spring mainly or wholly from his affection for a few people in Morehead, especially Dr. Caudill and her associate, the nurse Susan Halbleib. As Noel Perrin has shrewdly observed, Mr. McConkey is creating meaning out of ordinary life. In this instance he occasionally founders in that laudable effort because Rowan County, Kentucky, isn't his beat, even though he succeeded in surviving there for six years before he was called to Cornell University. Ithaca, New York, is as alien to Morehead, Kentucky, as it is to the mythic Ithaca; and the Finger Lakes region, where McConkey lives in an old farmhouse, is his spiritual country, not Morehead. As McConkey himself admits in *Court of Memory*, as he describes an odd experience with the hill people living near Morehead, "the region was theirs, not mine"; and he says that he does not know or understand them. Although he can describe them well enough from the outside, he doesn't know their interior life. Few educated people do. One of them, the late Harry Caudill, is quoted at

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length by McConkey in a passage that conveys light and heat. The same cannot be said of his quoting Joseph Campbell's simple-minded advice to follow your bliss, an egotistic prescription for anarchy and chaos.

As happens with most writers, the farther James McConkey moves from his proper quarter the more his prose suffers; and the last chapters of *Rowan's Progress* are not written with his usual exact and crisp idiom. The prose reflects the strain of his struggle to find significance in a tale that strikes me as markedly less interesting and significant than he wants it to be. But *Rowan's Progress* is still well worth reading, especially for Mr. McConkey's admirers—and for people daft on Kentucky. His own progress is considerable, as I have suggested; and he by no means is running downhill, as his brilliant memoir in the Spring issue of this magazine (Vol. XLV, No. 1), "Stories from My Life with the Other Animals" (devoted to his livestock and pets), demonstrates. This superb essay should be chosen for *The Best American Essays 1992*. My bet is that James McConkey will return to his own proper country and his natural subjects (including the natural world and its inhabitants) in his next book. In the meantime we can savor his accomplishment as a writer during the past forty years and more.

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DAVID DOOLEY

Poetry Chronicle

THE QUALITY OF BOOKS SUBMITTED FOR REVIEW this quarter was unusually high. From the twenty-six candidates I had no difficulty finding seven books which merit a warm recommendation. A few interesting near-misses had to be excluded because of space, and even the weakest volumes showed a certain measure of competence. Curiously, the final group of seven contains only two living American poets, both Southerners.

Poetry, according to Robert Frost, is what gets lost in translation. However, when the poet has lived in the United States for three decades and is named as the co-translator of his latest book, perhaps not quite so much as usual has been lost. To be sure, no matter how closely Czeslaw Milosz's *Provinces: Poems 1987–1991*[1] follows the sense of the original, the sound of English is not the sound of Polish. Milosz and his readers are fortunate that his co-translator, Robert Hass, is himself a poet with a good ear and a fine sense of flow. Consider the following passage from one of the best poems in the book, "Creating the World." Milosz reminds us of some of the necessary consequences of believing in a created universe:

> To invent length, width, height,
> Two times two and the force of gravity
> Would be quite enough, but on top of it, panties
> With lace, a hippopotamus, the beak of a toucan,
> A chastity belt with its terrible teeth,
> A hammerhead shark, a visored helmet,
> Plus time, that is, a division into was and will be.

This passage doesn't sound at all like a translation; indeed, it would do credit to any native speaker of English.

A couple of quibbles about the translations: "decoded" ("The true meaning, ready to be decoded") now carries with it the stench of academic jargon, and "supported" in its current psychobabble sense ("She lived among her own people who were not very happy but supported each other") seems anomalous when applied to the Europe of several decades ago.

[1] PROVINCES: Poems 1987–1991, by *Czeslaw Milosz*. Trans. by *Czeslaw Milosz* and *Robert Hass*. Ecco Press. $19.95.

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Milosz deals with three main themes in *Provinces*: the remembered world of his youth, religious meditations, and the world of art. One meaning of the title is thus literal. Milosz remembers the blacksmith shop; a rather gross estate owner who "caroused with chanteuses"; a country that "was ending, still generously / Protective with its osiers, mosses, wild rosemaries." However, he has now discovered "A New Province," as one poem is titled: old age. He recognizes that "Life got fulfilled, in a better or worse manner, / And a garden of forgiveness gathered all of us." His attention turns to ultimate questions of the existence of God and the meaning of history, especially the history of this century. "Meditation" and "Either-Or" are perhaps more impressive as religious meditations than as verse, but they express ideas many people have pondered. Either Christianity is true, in which case "human history is holy," or Christianity is a fiction, in which case "our capacity for self-delusion has no limits."

Possibly the realm of art, "a changeless garden on the other side of time," offers a way out of the dilemma. Corot, for instance, in his painting "revealed radiance in the disguise of a moment." Milosz says of a Constable painting that "We recognize the right / To change everything that is sadly real / Into a composition on canvas, which has for its subject / Air." Still, Milosz finds that leaving a few poems behind is "not a strong consolation."

Milosz does include several slight pieces, evidently willing to exhibit the marble chips from his studio as well as the statues. Perhaps this lack of self-criticism, only too common among writers, is connected with the tendency in a few poems to refer to himself, albeit ironically, as "a great poet" or "an eminent poet." It isn't Milosz the "eminent poet" who impresses in *Provinces*, but the poet who continues to do good work when he might well have stopped. "A Philosopher's Home," the last poem in the book, deserves special mention, and the form of "On a Beach" and "Return" (each prose sentence becoming a separate stanza or breath unit) might prove useful to other poets.

The fifty sonnets of Cesare Pascarella's *The Discovery of America*[2] form a delightful comic epic. Columbus comic? How can that be? Pascarella wrote his poem in 1894 in Romanesco, the language spoken by Romans during his lifetime. According to the introduction by the translator, John DuVal, Romanesco is "a language in which passion and tomfoolery combine for unusual effects." *The Discovery of America* is set in a Roman bar, where the narrator regales his drinking companions with the story of Columbus' first voyage. The "wild men" (i.e., noble savages) Columbus meets compare favorably with the Italian government and church. The American natives didn't have money, whereas "we're from a race / Of civilized, sophisticated people. / So we have money, which the government takes."

[2] THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA, by *Cesare Pascarella*. Trans. by *John DuVal*. University of Arkansas Press. $17.95.

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The flavor of the work can be found in these lines from the first sonnet:

> No luck at first. At first he couldn't beg,
> Finagle, argue people to the truth.
> They just laughed. He takes a hardboiled egg:
> "All right, you unbelievers, look. Here's proof!"
>
> Then and there, right before their noses
> He rolls his sleeves up, gingerly, gingerly poises
> The egg—Then *pop*. Ta dah! It stands erect!
>
> And when they see it standing on its toes
> Even the most recalcitrant stiff-necked
> Unbeliever hears, believes, and knows.

The ironic juxtaposition of tone, diction, and perspective is not only Pascarella's method but his vision. Byron's *Don Juan* seems the closest English equivalent. DuVal must have been thinking of Byron when he rhymed "Italian" with "shilly-shallyin'." Pascarella, not expecting too much of human nature, finds sympathy for Columbus, his sailors, and the fantastic "wild men" the narrator thinks they encountered in America. He has far less sympathy for the rulers of the world, but his satire is not heavy-handed. Appropriately, as translator, DuVal proves to have the light touch of a fine pastry chef.

Good news for Seamus Heaney's admirers: *Seeing Things*[3] is a volume to set alongside *Field Work* (1979), often considered his best. *Seeing Things* is a book of well-crafted short lyrics, most of which are set in the rural landscape of Northern Ireland familiar from *Field Work*. Those who enjoyed the ten "Glanmore Sonnets" in *Field Work* will probably find that the seven poems of "Glanmore Revisited" do not, like so many sequels, disappoint. The second half of *Seeing Things* is a sequence of 48 12-line poems, "Squarings." Further readings may elucidate the plan and arrangement of the sequence; for the time being, I have been content to read the pieces as separate lyrics comparable in tone and treatment to the individual lyrics in the first half of the book.

Like Antaeus, Heaney seems to gain strength whenever he touches the earth. Some of the lyrics here are inspired by simple objects: a door latch, a pitchfork, the marks for a ball field. As Heaney says in "Markings," "All these things entered you / As if they were both the door and what came through it." He urges us in another poem to "Secure / The bastion of sensation," which he certainly does in this book. At the same time, he gives full value to memories of the past,

[3] SEEING THINGS, by *Seamus Heaney*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $19.00.

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"where the extravagant / Passed once under full sail into the longed-for." Better still, Heaney is not sentimental about rural life. His poem about a traveling rope-man, who seems "Like a foul-mouthed god of hemp come down to rut," concludes:

> For even then, knee-high among the farmers,
> I knew the rope-man menaced them with freedoms
>
> They were going to turn their backs on; and knew too
> His powerlessness once the fair-hill emptied
> And he had to break the circle and start loading.

Seeing Things is also a book of reconciliation with the father. Its prologue translates the passage from the *Aeneid* where Aeneas seeks his father in the underworld; its epilogue translates the passage from the *Inferno* where Dante is to cross the river Styx. In retracing moments from his childhood and early adulthood Heaney finds union with his father.

Taste in diction has been Heaney's Achilles' heel. *Seeing Things* marks an advance, although he does stumble occasionally: "golden-bowelled as a moneybag"; "the little slapped palpable girl"; "Laved and ensconced in the throne-room of his mind." Set against a few lapses are many fine passages. Heaney can even be witty. A priest who looks like "an El Greco ascetic" is described as "saurian and stormy, / Adze-head on the rampage in the pulpit."

"Lovely" is not an adjective used much these days to describe poems, but that is just what any number of these poems are: the Frost-like masterpiece "The Pitchfork"; "Markings"; "Scrabble" and "The Skylight" from "Glanmore Revisited"; the first two sections of "Wheels Within Wheels"; poems ii, xv, xviii, xxix, xxx, xxxi, xxxix, xliv, and xlvi from "Squarings." "Field of Vision," equally strong, is too chilling to be called lovely. It's surprising to find Heaney trying the Larkin manner in "A Royal Prospect," and even more surprising that the poem works so well. Finally, Heaney's ear has never been better. His sense of rhythm, pause, and flow is masterful.

Les Murray's *The Rabbiter's Bounty: Collected Poems*[4] should bring this fine Australian poet, now in his fifties, to the attention of a wider American audience. Better editorial decisions could have made that encounter still more enjoyable. Murray's poems contain many references to Australian history and geography, and they use many specifically Australian terms, yet this hefty tome (309 pages of poems) does not include a single note. Notes and a glossary would have been most welcome.

[4] THE RABBITER'S BOUNTY: Collected Poems, by *Les Murray*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $25.00.

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American readers trained to expect a consistent manner or "voice" may find Murray disconcerting. He writes poems with heaped metaphors that recall Hopkins and Heaney; he also writes essay poems that recall late Auden ("Equanimity" is an Australian "In Praise of Limestone"). He writes poems in rhyme and in free verse, in short lines and in Whitmanesque long lines. He writes poems about religion—Murray is "roughly Christian," as one poem has it—and poems about the joy of wearing shorts.

Much more often than one would expect from a poet of Murray's talent, content seems separable from form. Content is Murray's strength. His Christianity is connected with a generosity of spirit, a concern for accurate registration, and a feeling for the particularity of animals, plants, places, and language. He excels at finding the historical perspective on the places and events he describes, and he seeks understanding rather than polemical point-making.

Murray's weakness is, in the broadest sense, form. The poems in rhyme are by and large the least successful. The ambitious "Aspects of Language and War on the Gloucester Road"—the historical grasp, personal, national, and linguistic, is quite impressive—sometimes rhymes in couplets, sometimes in quatrains, and sometimes irregularly with occasional unrhymed lines. The shifts don't seem to correspond to anything other than the poet's struggle with rhyme. Similarly, the free verse of "Immigrant Voyage," about his wife's journey as a child from war-torn Europe, seems like notes for a still better essay, and "The Steel," a poem in memory of his mother, employs the artless manner of dozens of American confessional poets (e.g., "I was in the town at school / the afternoon my mother / collapsed, and was carried from the dairy"). Both poems can even move the reader, despite the unimpressive verse-making. Structure and proportion are not Murray's strong points. Even some of the better poems, such as "Equanimity," begin with a "vamp till ready" approach. Metaphors proliferate until a theme is sighted, at which point the poem begins to develop. The elaborate natural descriptions of "Equanimity" are simply dropped once the more essay-like style begins, creating a strange stylistic disjunction.

Murray might refer to this characteristic of some of his poems as "sprawl." "The Quality of Sprawl," ironically one of his best-focused poems, gives as an example of sprawl "The fifteenth to twenty-first / lines in a sonnet." Murray is, as one might not expect, a brilliant aphorist. These lines were culled almost at random: "Hunting, we know, is mostly a form of shopping / where the problem's to make the packages hold still"; "Every machine has been love and a true answer"; "The powerful dream of being harmless"; [holiness] "cleanses awe of fear, though not of detailed love"; "Peace, and the proof of peace, is the verandah / absent from some of the newer houses here."

His poems from the 1980s are by and large his best, so I would recommend that the reader begin in the middle. Murray is very much

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a poet to be dipped into, set aside, and returned to. In some of the most striking poems, such as "Poetry and Religion," "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle," "The Future," "The Grassfire Stanzas," "At Min-Min Camp," "Fastness," "Flood Plains on the Coast Facing Asia," "Three Interiors," and "Quintets for Robert Morley," one finds a variety of topic and approach, a solidity of achievement, and even a formal satisfaction, that suggest that the best of Les Murray will wear very well.

American formalist poetry of the 1950s and 1960s—metered, intellectual, ironic, distanced—once seemed permanently displaced by the free verse surrealist revolution of poets like Robert Bly and W. S. Merwin. Recent retrospective collections by Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht have suggested otherwise, as does *Trying Conclusions: New and Selected Poems 1961–1991*[5] by the late Howard Nemerov. An American poet laureate, Nemerov was the kind of skilled technician who would have made an ideal poet laureate in centuries past, ready on request to turn out a victory ode or a funeral elegy. We don't expect poets today to address poems to Congress or write about the space shuttle, but Nemerov did. At the lowest level his poems can resemble writing exercises: "Write a poem about waiting rooms. About pockets. About dog poop." (See "Waiting Rooms," "Pockets," and "Walking the Dog" for the results: polished, but one feels the limitation of subject.)

His view of life is somewhat dark, but not too much so: "Once I saw world and thought exactly meet, / But only in a picture by Magritte"; "How many silly miracles there are / That will not save us, neither will they save / The world, and yet they are miraculous." His view of beauty is similar. He suggests that the beautiful is "not obvious, / Not inaccessible, but just between." Some details in Nemerov's poetry have dated, such as the phrase "O swallows, swallows" in "The Blue Swallows," with its deliberate echoing of Tennyson and Eliot, but the best work has plenty of strength beneath the academic veneer.

On the whole, the best of his later poems are the ones about World War II, which recall the war poems of Randall Jarrell. His work from the sixties and seventies is better still, however. Such poems as "To Clio, Muse of History," "Santa Claus," "The Iron Characters," "Blue Suburban," "The Rope's End," "The Blue Swallows," "Lines & Circularities," "The Western Approaches," "Boy with Book of Knowledge," and "Drawing Lessons" suggest that Nemerov has a good chance to remain a permanently interesting minor poet. Indeed, his wit, craft, quirky intelligence, and need to impose meaning on an apparently meaningless world often provide more vitality than the surrealists could provide for their own work.

[5] TRYING CONCLUSIONS: New and Selected Poems 1961–1991, by *Howard Nemerov*. University of Chicago Press. $18.95.

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Mary Stewart Hammond's first book, *Out of Canaan*,[6] cannot be called promising because she has already arrived. These are confessional poems with a difference. Hammond draws on her Southern background for a linguistic richness and sense of play few confessional poets possess, perhaps none after the original ones. Her work exhibits the complexity of diction and tonal register common to much of the best Southern fiction.

Hammond differs from poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton in several important respects. Although she endured traumatic experiences, she did not suffer from schizophrenia and she did not commit suicide. At (apparently) more than forty she is alive and sane. "Jesus Rum," her powerful poem about her minister father, contrasts significantly with Plath's "Daddy" in approach. Plath's speaker accuses her father of outrageous things (he's not only a Nazi but a vampire), and since we have no way of verifying what she says, we can only enjoy the comic force of the invective. On the other hand, Hammond presents enough information about her father in "Jesus Rum" for us to form our own judgments. Here is the opening of the poem:

> All our growing up Jesus lived in our house
> like one of those life-size, headless,
> cardboard figures impoverished Victorians
> posed behind, borrowing impossible finery
> for photographs. We called His name
> Father for it was your face and clerical collar
> atop His neck, your tongue gutting us
> with scorn and disgust and twisted logic
> for that which you were about to do:
> break our bodies in remembrance of Him.

Hammond doesn't insult her father; she nails him. The judgments in her poems usually seem as fair as they are unsparing.

Many poets have written about the failures of their fathers, but Hammond may be the first to write, in "Praying for Separation," about wishing her daughter would grow up and leave. Parents especially will appreciate the wry humor of "We know our trespasses; we still / have our hearing." Not all the poems in *Out of Canaan* are confessional; Hammond also displays a fine lyric gift, as the opening of "Saving Memory" demonstrates:

> Summer nights we put pennies on the track.
> Even the station was quiet enough for crickets.
> Mountains surrounded us, middling high and purple.

[6] OUT OF CANAAN, by *Mary Stewart Hammond*. W. W. Norton & Company. $17.95.

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> No matter where we stood they protected us
> with perspective. People call them gentle mountains
> but you can die in there; they're thick
> with creeper and laurel.

The few failures often come from taking the kinds of risks that pay off in other poems. Not all the Biblical diction in "Canaan" blends, and I didn't grasp the underlying convention of "Positive Thinking"—is the speaker supposed to be black? The poem almost works, anyway. The "candy heart" of "Triptych with Missing Madonna" is too close to the "pretty red heart" of Plath's "Daddy." An easily fixable shortcoming is the non sequitur simile, familiar from Dave Smith: children running off train tracks are "light as ideas"; a breast hangs "like memory"; men from her father's congregation "scared Mamma like daughters." Hammond has less to learn from Smith than he from her; many writers could learn from the way Hammond grounds her lyricism in specific actions and integrates levels of diction. Indeed, in her best dozen or so poems Hammond writes circles around established poets like Dave Smith and Louise Glück.

By now Andrew Hudgins can also, and quite rightly, be accounted an established poet. His third book, *The Never-Ending*,[7] is a good book that might have been better still. Prosodically, this is his best book yet. He plays the iambic meter against the curve of his sentences much more successfully than before. He strikes off many memorable phrases: "I repent the actual. It has never got me anywhere"; "surprised / at just how little fear it takes to break me"; "The self-pity of young men. / Awake, we almost kept it hidden." Most of the poems, whether they are about paintings or gardens or personal experience, concern religion. The religious viewpoint is can't-live-with-it, can't-live-without-it Southern Protestant agnosticism.

Hudgins, like a number of poets today, writes about religious art, especially Italian Renaissance painting, as a way of writing about a partly rejected Christian heritage. Some of these poems, which offer equivocal interpretations of Christian iconography, are very fine. In "The Cestello Annunciation," for instance, Hudgins notes how Mary's "whole body pulls away" whereas

> . . . her head, already haloed, bows,
> acquiescing. And though she will, she's not yet said,
> *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord,*
> as Botticelli, in his great pity,
>
> lets her refuse, accept, refuse, and think again.

[7] THE NEVER-ENDING, by *Andrew Hudgins*. Houghton Mifflin Company. $17.95.

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In some respects *The Never-Ending* seems Hudgins' most personal book. Certainly a number of poems seek to build a consistent first-person narrator. Since so many other poets follow the same procedure, Hudgins paradoxically has never sounded so much like part of the mainstream. If the books submitted for review are a fair sample, the poem of the moment is a loosely structured personal essay in which a consistent "I" holds center stage and in which subjects are swooped at only to be ducked away from. Hudgins has too much respect for poetic shape to go this far, although the first poem in the book comes close, especially when the account of a lynched black man gives way to the narrator's standing before a mirror to shine a flashlight in his mouth. Nevertheless, the last ten lines of this poem, which go off in yet another direction, become powerful, with the narrator concluding that "this world is home. But it / will never feel like home."

Hudgins focuses the poems which develop a conceit, such as the outstanding "Christ as a Gardener," "Ecce Homo," and "Lamentation over the Dead Christ," much more sharply than the overtly personal poems. "Praying Drunk," for instance, which begins and ends strongly, dissipates much of its tension during a scatological digression (the nuns are a rather cheap touch). The line "This is my favorite sin: despair" from "Praying Drunk" doesn't catch the flavor of some of the poems. The spiritual sin, to put it in those terms, is closer to a complacency in rancidness, not unlike what the Middle Ages called *acedia*. Hudgins sometimes depicts this spiritual malaise and sometimes merely reflects it. The sources of the narrator's feelings of guilt are never quite clear. The relative slackness of the personal essay poem may be the reason he occasionally lets his material get the better of him.

Throughout the book Hudgins has tonal difficulties with slang. In "Praying Drunk" "jerk" works well, but "goodies" and "that nature stuff" do not. His middle style works better when it moves toward the high style than toward the low. In "Green Inside the Door" the phrases "some guy you'd kissed" and "hell, it scared us too" seem out of place, whereas "Exquisite variants of green ran riot" and "starbursts / of black-green blossomed" seem a logical heightening.

One of the best poems in the book, "Rebuilding a Bird" (subtitled "dreaming of Audubon"), contains the observation "Sometimes it takes three tanagers / to rebuild one." The narrator observes, "I saw how deep you have to go / to get the surface right." That strikes me as a profound way of looking at art. Hudgins' old admirers, and the new ones he will gain through *The Never-Ending*, can only encourage him to go even deeper.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

Prized Poetry

WHEN I LOOKED THROUGH THE BOOKS I had selected for this review, I was surprised to discover how many had won prizes. It's certainly encouraging to know that poets have plenty of support in publishing their collections. Since these prizes are awarded by fellow poets, there must be a lot of networking out there and encouraging words. The National Endowment for the Arts also gets frequent credit among the happy acknowledgements. From here, the climate for the Muses looks healthy and supportive.

The Buried Houses[1] is David Mason's first book of poems and co-winner of the 1991 Nicholas Roerich Prize. Story-telling and autobiography contrast and blend artfully. From Rudolph II's passion for collecting paintings and potpourri in sixteenth-century Prussia to the author's childhood memories of Puget Sound, the poet's voice rings true. Mason projects himself into his own and other people's past lives with equal conviction. For him, history must be a blank page, as he observes in his opening poem, "To a Photojournalist." A day without event would offer: "A way of starting over, seeing / through an undistorted lens." The real story waits to be told out of ordinary lives; that is news. The tale of an old woman who comes to Washington State in 1902 becomes a legend haunting in its retelling. "Blackened Peaches" is her own account of her survival among losses, her childhood doctor's love and her lumberjack husband's sickness, remembered in old age with the resonances of an intimate conversation. In such monologues, Mason does for Puget Sound what Robert Frost did for New Hampshire by capturing life and landscape in the cadences of talk:

> I was only seventeen when I met Jim.
> He lumberjacked in the camp out to the lake.
> I always liked the woods, so green and nice,
> the ferns in bunches, trees covered with moss.
> When I was little I was scared to walk
> alone for fear the Indians would get me,
> but Jim made the woods seem lighter than before.

[1] THE BURIED HOUSES, by *David Mason*. Story Line Press. $10.95p.

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The unpretentious diction remains completely in character, neatly climaxing in the exact image of "lighter." The economy of the best short-story writers shines through the narratives; we get just as much information as we need, no more, no less. In "The Nightingales of Andritsena," a middle-aged tour guide and translator in Greece tries to find her lost youth in the young students she tutors, but her father's suicide long ago entraps her still. "The Old Brit" pictures a World War II veteran in Greece bitterly watching German tourists invade "with money and Minoltas" the country he fought to liberate from them.

In his personal poems, Mason is even more moving and convincing. One of his most rewarding sequences deals with the death of his brother in a mountain-climbing accident. "Small Elegies," "The Mountain Climber," "Dry Granite," and "An Absence" recall his brother's death with the classic truth of Catullus:

> My brother taught me how
> to climb with crampons, cut steps in the ice,
> hold him on belay. But in the chimneys
> we descended without ropes, otherwise
> I would have fallen too.
> I called his name as if he were alive,
> traversed the hard black face and slid
> down a thousand feet in a couloir's glare.
>
> "Small Elegies II"

We relive the drama of that terrible fall and its painful aftermath. By way of contrast, a grandfather's lifetime flashes past us in "Spooning," a lively anecdote about meeting granddad's old flame, a former silent-screen star visiting the old hometown. Small-town horizons clash with big-time fame to fill another of the poet's blank pages. Several love poems about the author's Canadian wife dramatize a relationship that ends in divorce. In every poem, Mason glues the reader's eyes to the page as he maps his private atlas of places and people.

Philip Dacey's fifth collection of poems, *Night Shift at the Crucifix Factory*,[2] won the Edwin Ford Piper Poetry Award. Dacey further develops his distinct style of juxtaposing daily life with the literary past, the vulgar with the venerable, the crudely comic with the Christian sublime. He is at his best in poems like "Strip Pachelbel" about a dancer in a Minnesota bar stripping to Pachelbel's Canon:

> She seemed to take the music seriously,
> to be listening to it more than watching us

[2] NIGHT SHIFT AT THE CRUCIFIX FACTORY, by *Philip Dacey*. University of Iowa Press. $9.95p.

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> watching her, like some music major in
> the privacy of her bedroom dancing to
> her favorite piece, though she performed it, too,
> each move as practiced as a halfback's fake
> or priest's elevation of the Host at Mass.

The three similes of the student, halfback and priest perfectly set out the theme of contrasting artistries. The colloquial tone mimics the stripper's art while the language balances between bare plainness and rhetorical decoration. She becomes an instant classic, a nude Venus, "a celebratory warrior— / priestess? athlete? orchestra conductor?" The dancer is the music: "I had no doubt / the music was her soul and she its body." "Vigil Strange" just as successfully catches a moment in the poet's life when, crushed at learning he has been denied custody of his children, he turns to Walt Whitman's *Drum Taps* and finds consolation and meaning in "a great mothering body of words." Some poems, however, lack the substance to sustain any real impact; too often the titles give the whole show away: "My Father's First Time," "Upon His Mailing a Child Support Check to L. L. Bean and a Check for Sleeping Bags to His Ex-Wife," and "Ars Poetica: A Reply to an Actor Who Complained That Poetry Is Aethereal and Doesn't Have Sweat in It, the Way Acting Art Does." "Coke" is an obvious example of stretching believability to make a point. The author, as a boy, imagines himself offering Christ on the cross a drink of Coke. The image too patly fits in with the theme of the book's title. Dacey confronts the problem of truth in a good poem entitled "Lies" about his efforts to love those close to him: he is still trying "to live that made-up story." He concludes: "We can't trust our imaginations / to give us the facts." Dacey does best by sticking to facts and not twisting situations and syntax to fill out a verse.

The hero of Debra Allbery's first volume of poems, *Walking Distance*,[3] is the writer Sherwood Anderson. Winner of the 1990 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize, the book opens with a poem about Anderson's discovery of himself as a writer of plain stories about plain people. "Sherwood Anderson Walks Out" follows the writer at the critical moment when he sees he is meant to express ordinary lives like his own: "His head is full of simple, solid words / as beautiful and neglected as these lives." A native of Anderson's hometown, the poet describes the "fugitive past" of lonely Ohio towns and farmlands. It's a bleak landscape, experienced up close but best seen from a distance. Winter seems to be the inevitable setting for these poems, in outer and inner weather. Childhood is locked forever at twelve with dreary trips to relatives, amid neighbors who are convicted murderers. Everything takes place in a car speeding nowhere:

[3] WALKING DISTANCE, by *Debra Allbery*. University of Pittsburgh Press. $17.95; $9.95.

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> Against the rushing reversible order
> of cornfields and Main Streets, against the whole
> landlocked silent movie of the Midwest.
> "Background, 1969"

It's no coincidence that the poet has done most of her writing in the East, far from her native soil. The final poem, "Angel Photograph and Dog," tells of returning home "eleven hundred miles of white, lost weather." She recalls a picture taken in New Hampshire of a friend dressed in angel armor and wings and of her conversation with him on the village green. The photo is symbolic of the soul's need to fly beyond its origins, like Rilke's angels, but of the desire also to return to roots as the only true story to be told. Allbery's poems are full of dreams, of tales of violent deaths and rebirths, of fears and hopes and journeys. As the book's title indicates, walking is a constant theme, in and out of town, in snow, to and from cemeteries, along railroad tracks, past reservoirs, awake or in dreams. In "Walking Below Zero You Tell Yourself," she declares: "You walk / in as straight a line as you can." The opposite image remains just as persistent: staying at rest indoors, house-sitting, going nowhere. "Good Friday" describes the conflict:

> All I have is my story, a simple construction—
> a little house you see repeating itself
> with variations, street after street.
> I've tried to keep my life quiet, spare—
> a contained existence, like that of a woman
> who is born and dies in her father's house.

Instead, the poet has lived "in a blur of foster homes," moving from place to place, meeting strangers and leaving friends. In "A Little Blessing," she writes: "What I like about my life is one room contains it. / It's spare and clean." On the other hand, she admits, "the world outside has always been beyond me. / I don't know how it works, what holds it up." Such straightforward honesty works well within the frame of these poems. Allbery has found a voice that gives scope to inner limitations and outer chaos; her words come right in on target.

Childhood looks bleak to Susan Wood in *Campo Santo*,[4] the 1991 Lamont Poetry Selection for a second book of poetry. The poet's mother, to whom the volume is dedicated, dominates her daughter's thoughts, literally from start to finish. "January, 1946" follows her pregnant mother on the train from San Francisco to Texas, a reluctant war bride "imagining me sleeping inside her, little fish / rocked in the waters under her heart." Both women are trapped, and

[4] CAMPO SANTO, by *Susan Wood*. Louisiana State University Press. $14.95; $7.95.

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the daughter's story involves her flight from these chains. The poems become a form of deliverance, a daughter's gift of love, and an offering to her mother through the saving grace of verse. "Campo Santo," the title poem, movingly expresses this theme by grief over a friend's loss of a son in Mexico. Together, they plant paper flowers at his grave: "*Campo santo*, they call it, / *holy field*, and even those without belief / say it is blessed by the dead who lie there." All were once loved by someone and some are still remembered. The author tries to console her friend, but fails: "I saw then that nothing could / comfort you":

> I don't know how else to say this.
> Which is the greater sorrow, to feel
> you can't live without him or to find,
> after all, that you can?

What matters is the effort to express one's grief and concern. The poem, like a paper flower, fragile and touching, is a personal and traditional gesture of love. Other poems embody the same wish to make amends by reaching out and risking refusal. "Hollow" recalls the area where blacks lived, the servants white parents and their children employed and ignored or misunderstood. The poem attempts to express regret for a world of ignorance and shame: "Description is the best / you can do, but not enough." The word "hollow" sums up both the place in the past and the poet's present frustration. Wood often packs whole histories into a few lines. Take the opening of "Distances":

> Now time has made us,
> if not friends, at least not enemies.
> I wake in our old house while you're away
> and go downstairs for coffee and the *Post*,
> the children I've come to stay with still asleep.

An entire relationship unfolds in the brief scene. Leaving her husband and two children, the author sought her own identity and future. She recalls, with irony, her mother's attempts to shape her family's life; trying to start a tradition of visiting the family grave on Christmas Eve is one bizarre example, recounted with patience and humor. The final note of the poems remains "Hope": "What saves us begins / as something small, the thing / so insignificant we hardly notice." Susan Wood notices and records the moments with insight and compassion.

The first person we meet in Linda McCarriston's *Eva-Mary*[5] is a judge. He decrees that an abused wife, Eva-Mary, must reconcile with

[5] EVA-MARY, by *Linda McCarriston*. TriQuarterly Books. $17.95; $10.95.

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her husband "for the sake of the family." His decree reflects a male conspiracy of private and public abuse that outrages the author, a victim of physical and sexual horrors that she relates with compelling honesty and eloquence. Her second volume of poems, winner of the Terrence Des Pres Prize for Poetry, tells of the beatings she, her brother and mother suffered at the hands of a monster, an Irish laborer in Lynn, Massachusetts, whose rule of life was, "A man is king in his own castle." His right to rape his daughter is absolute; in "A Castle in Lynn," he masturbates when remembering the pleasure. The only revenge for the daughter is now to tell the complete tale of terror on behalf of other victims. "Dismantling the Castle" utters its merciless curse that abused children may grow up to be writers, filmmakers, or artists. "May their words put your words back into / your mouth, verbatim," she urges, "precise as how / animals learn." "My Father's Laughter" describes the poet's own fractured spine, protruding like a ball and still aching, from the kicks she received from her drunken father.

The hero of this nightmare is the mother, who fought to save her children when priest, judge, and doctor failed to help, and who finally, at fifty-three, divorced the ogre she had been chained to. In the settlement she gets nothing, having worked "for room and board" according to the court. The daughter suffers from the same system, losing custody of her son in her own divorce case. In "Thirteen Next Birthday," she observes that for years her son's name has not been hers and "nowhere / is what we are to each other our own: / the mother, the son." In a scene that alludes to the devil offering the kingdoms of the world to Jesus, she pictures the father showing the son the dominions of "wisdom and power" that will be his. True, McCarriston presents only one side of family life, its violence and violations, but her poems are charged with undeniable passion, intelligence, and truth while suggesting another vision of life. Several poems describe the vital beauty of horses and her care for them. "A Thousand Genuflections" portrays perfectly the feeding of a mare and the special bond between animal and human, a mirror of trust and dependence:

> I've come like this each day
> for years across the hard winters,
> seeing a figure for the thing itself,
> divine—appetite and breath,
> flesh and attention. This morning
> her presence asks of me: *And might*
> *you be your body? Might we be*
> *not the figure, but the thing itself?*

"The Apple Tree" opens and closes this fine, brave volume. The poem, dedicated to the author's mother, sums up the thing itself, the

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old tree still gravid with life in winter, *Eva* whose root meaning is *to live.*

In *As If It Matters*,[6] his fourth poetry collection, Eamon Grennan continues to probe for patterns in "the bits and pieces" (a favorite phrase) of everyday existence. He seeks for order in the ordinary world, especially as he sees it reflected in art, in painters like Vermeer and Bonnard. Eating, talking, walking, in touch with the things around us, these are the actions he delineates with an artist's eye and ear for vital detail and vocal nuances. In "That Ocean," the speaker moves from "the scrubbed exactitudes" of a woman's dress or a crow's flight to "the dimmer thing / that shivers at the brink." Both the particular texture and its essence elude him, but life, like poetry, offers revelation:

> At uncommon intervals of attention
> we remember ourselves
> as one with this world: we enter
> the network, a thicket of stillness
> where in early spring a sapling of apple or cherry
> sends out where it stands
> inside the wire fence containing the graveyard
> spray after spray of blossom
> to stagger the eye
> at the solid grey threshold
> of tombstones scoured by rain . . . .

This reflection leads the poet to a vision of Lorenzetti's "Allegory of Good and Bad Government" in Siena. Grennan relishes such leaps of the imagination which shape new mosaics that are poems. "Breaking Point" joins a woodcutter's precision in splitting blocks of maple with the pain of divorce, "in the world we make and break / for ourselves." A man with two families, a teenage son and daughter in one and a baby daughter in the other, a sojourner in two countries, Ireland and America, Grennan sees double in life and death, past and present, recalling his father's meeting him at Kingsbridge Station in "Walk, Night Falling, Memory of My Father" and bidding his own son farewell at a Hudson Valley depot in "Station." Poems interlock and form their own patterns. "Early Learning" pictures a baby watching her shadow on the wall, then spotting shadows of birds at a feeder outside. She swivels to look for the real birds, only to be blinded by light from the window. Plato's cave comes to mind with all its resonance of learning and unlearning. Grennan offers his own allegory for the dialectics of poetry in "The Cave Painters." Whether in solitary silence or friendly companionship, the artists created a

[6] AS IF IT MATTERS, by *Eamon Grennan*. Graywolf Press. $19.00; $11.00.

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primal vision of the animal and spiritual nature of human life as they "came to terms / with the given world" to leave something lasting after them buried deep in the dark. Grennan's poems at their best possess that same sense of permanence and serious purpose. Here is poetry that will last, that will be read long after the present shadows have passed. Yes, poetry matters and endures beyond "this nowhere / that is now here."

Iris,[7] a book-length poem by Mark Jarman, author of four previous collections, features a woman who prizes the poetry of Robinson Jeffers. He is her secret treasure buried under the hard crust of a harsh life. In Western Kentucky, Iris dreams of the ocean and granite cliffs of California. In her mid-twenties, she abandons her abusive husband and returns with her four-year-old daughter to her mother and twin brothers who live in a mobile home and raise marijuana. When her brothers and mother's lover are murdered, she takes her daughter and injured mother to California where, for twenty years, she settles down with an alcoholic salvage salesman. The poem, in three parts, ends with her leaving her second husband and heading north to Carmel to visit at last her dream-castle, Jeffers' home, Thor House. Iris is accompanied by a homeless woman whom she picks up on the road and who acts as her guide. Jarman's characters are unheroic, unlike Jeffers' larger-than-life figures based on biblical and classic myth. Everything about Iris sounds believable: her fascination with a poet discovered in a college course, her idealizing the English professor who introduced her to poetry, her dedication to her daughter and mother, and her inner strength. Jeffers argued that salvation from self-centeredness could only come by "falling in love outside" with non-human nature. Ironically, Iris falls in love with him and his words. She is sensible enough to question his philosophy; she cannot accept his belief that humanity is the mould to break from: "'That's the problem,' she said. 'It's always the problem with Jeffers. Just when people in his poems / Begin to look like people you might meet some day, they go back to being only symbols.'" The criticism is just, but certainly not true of Jarman's characters who are symbolic in a natural way. Events flow with the dialogue; the long lines sweep the narrative forward with a novelistic movement and emotion. It's an engrossing story, mixing lush descriptions of nature with stark cityscapes and bleak suburbia:

> Among the still naked branches of the hedgeapples, Iris
> pictured the stars,
> The exiting winter constellations appearing face down
> toward the west, led by Orion

[7] IRIS, by *Mark Jarman*. Story Line Press. $23.95; $16.95.

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Into that low dull redness over the mobile home's
aluminum roof.

Iris feels a need to read Jeffers' poetry in a quest for what lies within and beyond the verse: "I think there's something else that he's not telling." Jeffers, who repudiated introspection and saw "tidal recurrences" in the speech of poetry, would agree. Poetry lifts us out of ourselves into another dimension. The dead poet has found in Iris a true disciple, and Jarman has fashioned her to be a messenger of the gods, a flower, and a seeing eye: all Irises. At Thor House, Iris finds herself: her bloom, lavender, blue, the ocean's color. She possesses the secret she has sought, entering "The house where pain and pleasure had turned to poetry and stone, and a family had been happy." She has found home. The poet has created his heroine. And the reader has discovered a narrative poem to prize.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

HEATHER Mac DONALD* is a writer living in New York City. She has published in *The New Criterion* and other magazines. . . . JOSEPH EPSTEIN's most recent book is *The Goldin Boys*, a collection of short stories, published by W.W. Norton. . . . Last spring PHILIP LEVINE retired from teaching at California State University, Fresno, after more than thirty years. His prose book, *The Bread of Time Redeemed*, will be published by Knopf in 1993. . . . JOHN HAINES's *New Poems, 1980–88* (Story Line Press) won both the Lenore Marshall/ Nation Award and the Poets Prize for the best book of poems published in 1991. A memoir, *The Stars, The Snow, The Fire*, is available in paperback from Washington Square Press. . . . GARY KRIST's stories in this issue are part of a second collection, *Bone by Bone*, which will be published in 1993 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. . . . MARY WINIFRED HOOD,* a native of Wilmington, North Carolina, is a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill. Her poems in this issue are her first writings to be published anywhere. She is presently living in Mecklenburg, New York, and is working on a novel. . . . ROBIN S. CHAPMAN's* second book of poems, *Learning to Talk*, was published by Fireweed Press in 1991.

LUCILLE DAY is the author of a collection of poems, and a co-author of *How to Encourage Girls in Math and Science: Strategies for Parents and Educators* (Prentice-Hall, Inc.). . . . JOHN LOUGHERY,

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whose biography of the detective novelist S.S. Van Dine was published by Scribner's this year, is currently working on a biography of the American painter John Sloan. . . . RICHARD HORNBY's most recent book is *The End of Acting: A Radical View* (Applause Theatre Books). . . . In addition to lecturing in Europe before the Bournonville Festival, MARCIA B. SIEGEL gave a week of workshops last summer at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, and lectured on New Dance at the Taipei Institute for the Arts, Taiwan. . . . BERT CARDULLO was recently appointed Head of the B.A. Program in Theatre at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. . . . WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD's *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life* has recently been published as a paperback. . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS' editions of *Shenandoah: Five Verse Plays by Delmore Schwartz* (BOA Editions) and *Delmore Schwartz & James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (W.W. Norton) will be published this fall. . . . HAROLD FROMM gave a lecture at Union College (in Schenectady) in May on "Reconstruing American Ecology." . . . GEORGE CORE, a native of Lexington, Kentucky, has edited the *Sewanee Review* (now in its centennial year) since 1973. . . .DAVID DOOLEY's second book of poems, *The Revenge by Love*, will be published by Story Line Press. . . . JAMES FINN COTTER is Professor of English at Mount Saint Mary College and President of the Hopkins International Association.

The following information was omitted from the Notes on Contributors in our last issue (Summer 1992):

FREDERICK BROWN ("Zola and the Making of *Nana*") is a professor of French at the State University of New York (Stony Brook). He is at work on a critical biography of Emile Zola, to be published by Knopf. . . . ROBERT McDOWELL ("Four Poems") lives in Brownsville, Oregon. He is preparing a third collection of poems for publication. . . . JEFFREY FRANKLIN's* poem "Florida" is his first publication in a national magazine.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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TEN WAYS TO KNOW IF YOUR NEIGHBOR IS A SPACE ALIEN:

10. Has trouble with spatial relationships, such as frequently walking into door jambs.

9. Uses overly formal language, such as "May I have the pleasure of accompanying you to your backyard lawn chair?"

8. Uses a paring knife to eat Cheerios and milk.

7. Wears underwear on the outside of jeans.

6. Asks for beer to be served on the rocks.

5. Thinks poetry has mass market appeal.

4. Believes Marxism died when Groucho did.

3. Supports Harold Stassen for President in 1992.

2. Maintains that Madonna's hair is naturally blond.

1. Doesn't subscribe to The Village Voice.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

My own two-cent theory holds that artists don't finally believe in autobiography; deep down they don't hold with it, as an earlier generation used to say, as a sufficiently worthy vessel of truth-telling. They don't hold with it principally because they sense, if they do not absolutely know, that there is a higher truth than that offered by the pedestrian but necessary factuality demanded by autobiography. Or, as Goethe wrote in *Fiction and Truth*: "A fact of our existence is of value not insofar as it is true, but insofar as it has something to signify." Only in art do all facts signify.

—Joseph Epstein, "First Person Singular," p. 367.

My mother announced her intention to find a job on the night the Apollo 11 astronauts landed on the moon. She and my father had roused us from our beds at 1:00 A.M. and carried us bodily to the couch in front of the new color television. "This is world history," my father had informed Elise and me, arranging blankets around our legs even though it was mid-July. I'm glad he said that, because his words forced me to pay attention. "This is world history," I repeated as I watched that bulky white figure bounce around on the screen. I forced my groggy brain to lock in on that image. Even so, the thing I remember most vividly about the broadcast was that the reception was terrible.

—Gary Krist, "Giant Step," from "The Erikson Stories," p. 425.

Miss Saigon is not a musical comedy. Neither are *Les Misérables*, *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, nor most of the other Anglo-American atrocities perpetrated on the Broadway stage in the last decade. These productions are *operettas*, a European form with exotic, usually historical settings, sentimental plots, and a lush, operatic style of music that is closer to Puccini than to Porter (though Puccini would probably gag if he had to listen to it). As with opera, lyrics and dialogue are relatively unimportant; an opera or operetta can please an audience that does not know a word of the language it is written in.

—Richard Hornby, "Musicals Revived," p. 452.

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